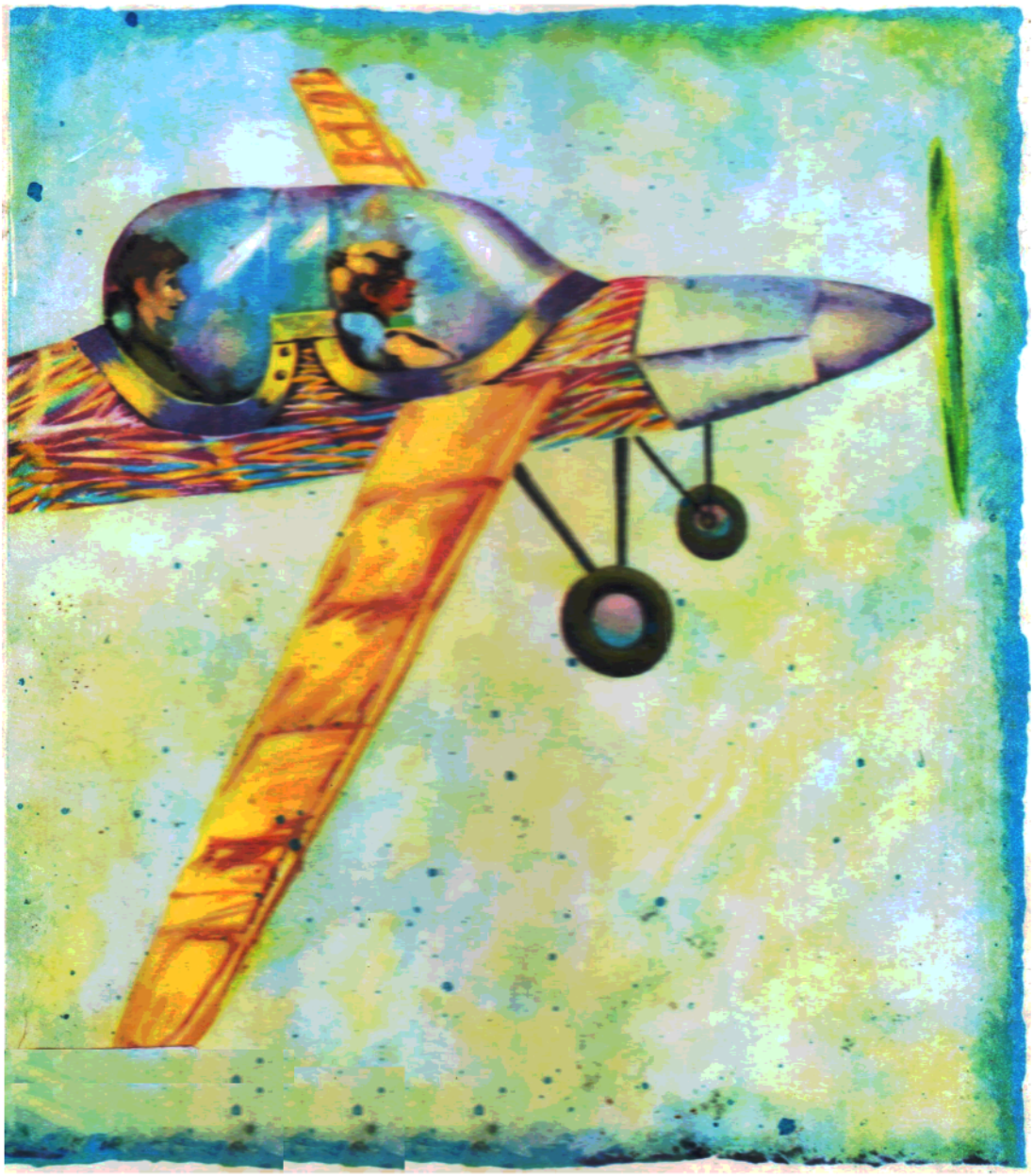
Vladislav Krapivin

Winged Tales



Vladislav Krapivin

Winged Tales

Drawings by *G. Kalinovsky*

Raduga Publishers
Moscow

Translated from the Russian by *Jan Yevtushenko*

В. Крапивин
ЛЕТЯЩИЕ СКАЗКИ
На английском языке

© Состав, иллюстрации. «Детская литература», 1978.

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
English translation © Raduga Publishers 1984

К $\frac{4803010102\text{-}360}{031(01)\text{-}84}$ 024-84

Contents

THE PILOT
FOR SPECIAL MISSIONS
5

THE MAGIC CARPET
111

The Pilot for Special Missions

Chapter One

That spring Alex's parents had moved into a wonderful new flat. It was on the fourth floor and its windows looked out onto all the tall blocks of flats around and the little old houses further down towards the end of Glider Street.

This area had once been a sports airfield, which in summer was overgrown with clover, plantain and all sorts of other plants whose

names nobody knew. Wormwood grew thickly along the airfield's edges and in the midst of it stood a small lorry with a winch which used to wind a thin cord round a drum and hoist the different-coloured gliders into the air in the same way as children fly kites at the end of long lengths of string.

Alex was told all about it by the children who used to live in the old houses nearby and Val Yakovlev told him a truly amazing story about how a real aircraft had landed at the airfield once. It was a two-seater with orange wings, a silver body and red numbers on its side. Something must have gone wrong with its engine and its pilot was forced to make an emergency landing but as he did not know the best place to land, he kept circling overhead. So Val dashed out onto the runway, dived into the grass and stretched his arms out in a letter "T" as a landing signal showing the pilot how best to land into the wind. After landing his plane and fiddling about with its engine for a while, the pilot asked Val if he would like a spin. Val, of course, jumped at the idea and so the pilot helped him into the back seat and did three circles over the field. None of the other children — not even the ones who had been living there longest — believed this story but Alex did. He was willing to believe anything worthwhile and interesting.

He often recalled the story afterwards and secretly envied Val. And he once even dreamed of something similar. True, his dream was not quite the same but he also saw an aeroplane and an airfield. It was a warm night and the sky over the airfield was studded with huge stars and only the distant horizon was streaked with crimson from the setting sun with the black outlines of the tall blades of grass standing out clearly against it. A little plane was waiting there and Alex was hurrying towards it, waist-high in grass, as fast as his legs could carry him for he was terrified it would take off without him.

Later on he wrote the following poem:

I dreamed a plane was waiting for me,
A night plane without lights.
In its cockpit sat a pilot,
Chewing on a cigarette end, anxiously
for I was nowhere in sight.
And I ran and ran towards the plane.

As fast as my legs would carry me,
Dreading the black flight ahead.
The pilot said, "I'm in a heck of a hurry,
Get in quick and let's be off.
Please put on your parachute:
There'll be danger on the way."
What exactly he meant by that
I never did find out
For at that very moment I awoke...
The morning town was roaring outside
And so it was my spell broke...

Alex wrote this serious poem down in a thick exercise book along with all his other serious poems, the one about a dog losing its master, and another about a boy who was made to take violin lessons although he really wanted to be an explorer and not a musician, and many others besides.

He did not show his book to anyone for he did not dare to and, anyway, it was his secret. What's more, one of his last poems contained the following lines:

Masha, like a daisy in the grass,
You're sweet, pretty and kind,
How wonderful it is you exist!
That's what matters most to my mind.

It was obvious you would not care too much for anyone to see these verses. Alex, however, did not hide the fact that he wrote poetry. On the contrary, he was only too pleased to write funny limericks for the school magazine or clues for games of charades. And he once wrote some verses about the prince in "Cinderella" and it was because of them that he fell out with Olympiada Victorovna. And it is with this incident that our story begins — the story about the journey with the Green Pass and Alex and the Pilot and many other wonderful things.

Olympiada Victorovna ran a children's drama group in the recreation room attached to the administration offices in Alex's block of flats. The group was intended to give the children an extra interest at home. Now retired, Olympiada Victorovna had worked for many years as a theatre wardrobe mistress. She could have been an actress

but for the unfortunate circumstance that she had never learnt to pronounce her "r"s and said something more like a "w". For instance, a conversation between her and Uncle Yura, the local plumber, would go something like this:

"It's a disgwace! When are the wadiators going to be mended? It's weally widiculous twying to work in this woom!"

Uncle Yura who was by no means shy but, on the contrary, rather rude, cringed and mumbled, "We'll get it done. I'll report it to the manager today. Right now, I will!"

But Olympiada Victorovna, tall, erect and stern, fired back, "I can't possibly teach childwen to appweciate beauty in a damp woom! We've going to wuin the pwemière and it'll be all your fault!"

And as she said so, she pointed her spindly, pencil-like index finger at poor old Uncle Yura as if she was going to stab him with it.

The drama group was rehearsing for a production of "Cinderella" and the title role was being played by Masha Berezkina — the girl whom Alex had dedicated his poem to.

Although she and Alex went to the same school, they were in parallel forms and so Alex could not get to know her well at school and she did not come out to play in their yard at home because she took music and figure-skating lessons.

However, after they broke up for the summer holidays Alex found out that Masha had joined the drama group and so at once joined too.

He very much hoped that Olympiada Victorovna would give him the prince's part for, you see, the prince had to fence against some bandits trying to kidnap Cinderella and Alex was good at fencing as there had been a fencing section at his old school and he had taken a few lessons. (In fact, he was sorry he had to change schools).

Unfortunately, however, Olympiada Victorovna had announced that Alex was to stand guard at the royal palace's gates and chose for the prince's part a taller and older boy.

For some reason or other everybody went into raptures over her choice and hailed him as a wonderfully talented actor, but Alex could see nothing special in him. And when the prince was dressed up in his royal attire, Alex even noticed that he was far too skinny and had slightly bandy legs. What's more, he had no idea about how to carry a sword. And Alex had then gone back-stage muttering under his breath, "Our prince's bandy-legged... And his sword's drooping like a brolly on a stand."

All of a sudden he heard someone laugh and spotted Masha standing very close to him. She laughed quietly and heartily and then seized hold of Alex's elbow and said in a very kind voice: "Oh, Alex, do stop feeling upset. How can you get so worked up over just a silly prince. I've got to act most the play with him but I'm not letting it get me down, see."

Alex felt like whooping with joy but did not, of course. He simply smiled to show that everything was all right and that he had no intention of getting upset. And he felt so happy that he even volunteered to go and fetch some old hats with Olympiada Victorovna. Then it appeared that Masha was going, too.

The hats were for the royal guards, courtiers and the fat coachman whom the Fairy Godmother made out of a rat. But where could you get so many hats from? It seemed Olympiada Victorovna knew just the place to go. She announced that she had "an old fwend" called Sofia Alexandrovna who had also been a wardrobe mistress once, but was now retired. She was, however, still kept just as busy as before by her important life-long hobby of collecting hats. She had over a thousand of them and they were all different. So famous was her collection that there had even been an article about her in a national theatre journal. Representatives from various theatres and drama studios often visited Sofia Alexandrovna to ask her advice and borrow hats for their productions. She was only too pleased to give advice but less so to lend her hats as three years ago a local drama group had lost a Spanish cocked hat of hers.

"But she'll definitely come to our wescue," said Olympiada Victorovna. "She'll wescue us because we're old fwends." And so off they went.

On the way there Olympiada Victorovna told Masha and Alex about how Sofia Alexandrovna lived in an old house on the edge of a gully in Lopukhov Lane. She had had plenty of opportunities to move into a new flat but did not want to in case her hats got spoiled or lost during the removal. What's more, she had four tom-cats named Kuzya, Roly-Poly, Vaska and Matador. Sofia Alexandrovna simply doted on them and was afraid they would not take to a new flat.

"Of course, this may sound wather funny," remarked Olympiada Victorovna," but we must bear with other people's weaknesses."

And saying so, for some reason or other, she gave Alex a stern look, but he took no notice as he was walking along, looking at Masha and thinking with a smile, "Masha, you're pretty and kind, to my mind..."

It was a bright hot day in June and Masha's golden hair was shining in the sunlight and she, too, looked very bright as she hopped and skipped along the pavement and chased after a shiny lemonade bottle top.

Chapter Two

The little house was standing right on the edge of the gully. A very long time ago it had probably been quite attractive but was now so old and so deeply sunken in the earth that its window-panes nearly reached the ground, its drainpipes dug into the grass and there was a hollow where there had once been a porch by the door.

The door was opened by a frail old lady with a pointed nose.

"Sofia, darling!" exclaimed Olympiada Victorovna, sweeping towards her. "What a pleasure this is!"

However, it did not seem a pleasure to Sofia Alexandrovna. She looked so distressed that Olympiada Victorovna stopped sharply.

"But, Sofia, my dear! What ever's wong?"

"Oh, my dear Lympie," sobbed Sofia Alexandrovna. "Kuzya's been stolen..."

"It can't be!"

The old lady waved her hands despairingly.

"He can't have been!" said Olympiada Victorovna firmly. "He's just gone off for a walk somewhere, that's all. You weally shouldn't be so upset!"

"Oh no, he hasn't. He's never done it before. He always comes home in the evening but he's been missing for two days. I've already contacted the militia but they don't want to look for him and I think they find my complaint ridiculous."

"Oh, how heartless of them," said Olympiada Victorovna. "But Sofia... Is it weally worth getting so upset? After all, you've got thwee other cats and they're all weally adowable cweatures."

Sofia Alexandrovna waved her hand feebly.

"Oh, these creatures... They never stop fighting... Of course, I love them dearly but Kuzya was the best of all. He was so affectionate and sweetnatured... Oh, but do please come in," she recollected suddenly. "What ever am I..."

The large low-ceilinged room smelled of mothballs, mould and cats. Slanting rays of sunlight streamed through the small windows and were reflected off the yellow floor. The dusty cut-glass chandelier hanging from the ceiling and the silver teaspoons in the old dresser were gleaming dimly.

"Do sit down," sighed Sofia Alexandrovna.

But this was practically impossible as there were hats lying on all the chairs. Indeed, everywhere you looked, hats were poking out of shelves, hanging on walls, stacked high on an old squat chest of drawers. Grand silk top hats, straw boaters, Mexican sombreros, Tyrolese hunting hats with pheasant's feathers and musketeer hats with plumes.

"Golly!" whispered Masha.

Olympiada Victorovna pushed Masha and Alex forward and said, "These are two talented young artists of mine. We're here on business..."

"Talented, my foot!" Alex thought angrily. "It's your prince who's talented. You only need me to lug your hats about." But of course he said nothing aloud but simply stood gazing round.

There were other interesting things in the room besides hats such as a bronze candlestick with blue glass trimmings, an old gramophone with a huge horn and a brightly-coloured china gnome sitting half inside an egg like a goose's.

The gnome was standing on the chest of drawers next to a pile of hats and among various scraps of material and yellowed lace. Alex stepped nearer to get a better look at the gnome.

Then all of a sudden behind the hats he caught sight of a glass box rather like an aquarium.

"Surely fishes can't be living in such a dark box," thought Alex. He carefully moved a grey cowboy's hat aside to have a look at the aquarium but the pile of hats collapsed and tumbled onto the floor.

But it wasn't Alex's fault! A tousled ginger cat shot out from under the hats, bounded across the room and catapulted out of the window.

"Roly-Poly!" gasped Sofia Alexandrovna. "What's got into you? Oh, gracious me, you never give me a moment's peace."

Alex and Masha began hurriedly picking up the hats.

"Never mind, never mind," Sofia Alexandrovna kept saying. "It was Roly, the little devil, that knocked them over... What delightful children... This cap goes here..."

Freed from the pile of top hats, bowlers and cocked hats, the shiny glass box stood all alone on the chest. It was not an aquarium. It was a glass case containing a sailing ship on bronze supports that was no bigger than a cowboy's hat but was a perfectly made model ship.

Alex leaned against the chest and for a while forgot about everything else in the world.

You would be wrong to think that Alex dreamed of becoming a captain or a traveller. No, he had another dream but he did love the sea. The year before he had been to the Crimea and still recalled the brilliant blue horizons, green breakers and huge stems of passenger-ships rising above the piers. Well, and, of course, he was also very fond of books about pirates, sea adventures and sailing ships. And one look at the model was enough for him to realise it was a clipper: the ship had a low bowsprit over its sharp stem, three tall masts with straight sails and a narrow, streamline body. Its sides were covered with shiny nut-brown laquer and its bottom with thin copper plating.

Taut rope ladders (Alex knew they were called "shrouds") ran from the sides to projections on the masts. Tiny anchors hung from beams as thick as matchsticks. A finely-moulded wheel the size of a small coin was fastened to the steering column in front of the chart house.

"What a beauty", whispered Masha hotly against Alex's cheek.

"It's a clipper." Alex whispered back, pleased that Masha liked the little ship.

Leaning so close to him that her hair tickled his ear, Masha said quietly: "When I was little, I wanted to be a sailor."

"Don't you now?"

"Well, now I realise they don't take girls."

"They do sometimes. I saw a film about it once... And I read about a woman captain in a magazine."

"I know..." Masha sighed. "But it's hard. I may have a go, though... But you see, when I was little I didn't know it was hard."

Alex smiled.

"And now?"

"What about now?" asked Masha in surprise.

"You're not fully grown yet, are you?"

"No, but all the same... I'm not a little girl any more. I didn't know anything then. I used to think that the most important thing for a sailor was to have a sailor's collar. I used to cry my eyes out every day and beg Mummy to make me a dress with a collar like it. And I got my own way in the end..."

"I've still got a sailor suit", said Alex rather dreamily. "Mum bought it when we were going down south. Its collar's really huge, like a blue flag. When it flaps in the wind, you feel you've got wings and even fancy you could fly... The suit's lovely and light and white like a sail."

They stood for a moment in silence, gazing at the clipper's delicate lawn sails which were flat and still.

"They need wind," said Alex.

"Of course," agreed Masha in a whisper. "But, you know, I really don't understand. After all, it's a ship and not a hat. What's it doing here?"

Sofia Alexandrovna and Olympiada Victorovna were chatting away, eagerly interrupting one another:

"Oh, Sofia, you must wealise that you weally need a new flat..."

"No, no, Lympie, I don't. I'm too set in my ways..."

Trying to be as polite as possible, Alex waited for a pause in the conversation and then said loudly, "I'm sorry, but would you mind telling us where you got this model?"

Sofia Alexandrovna flew up her hands ("My, what a delightful boy!") and began saying hurriedly, "Yes, it is an interesting little thing. True, I came by it quite by chance. An old lodger who lived here many years ago made it. And then he died and the ship was left here with me. It's a very sweet little thing although I'm, of course, not an expert on things of this sort. The TV studios wanted to buy it for some film or other but what do I need money for? I offered to exchange it for two Napoleonic hussars' shakos. They agreed but the shakos turned out to be complete fakes..."

Shortly afterwards the guests said good-bye to the old lady and Alex was given a high stack of hats which had been worn rusty brown

by time and reeked so strongly of mothballs that he kept wanting to sneeze.

"Well, darling, we weally must be off. Now be a dear and don't get upset about Kuzya..."

"Oh, Lympie..."

Alex went out last.

"Alex," Sofia Alexandrovna called quietly to him.

Alex turned round slowly and peered at her through the hats.

"Alex... You seem to me to be a splendid and kind boy. I want to ask you a favour. If you happen to see a grey cat with a white neck and a pink scratch on one ear, please try and catch him and bring him back here... Of course, this may sound ridiculous but I've grown so attached to him."

Alex did not consider himself splendid or kind. He even blushed to the roots of his hair from embarrassment and shame whenever such things were said about him. However, he began to feel sorry for the old lady. It was just too bad that silly cat Kuzya was the dearest thing she had in the world. And so he said, "Why no, it's not in the least bit ridiculous. Last year my puppy Julbars got lost and I cried all day long. I'll do my best. If I catch sight of your Kuzya, I'll definitely get him back to you."

He had invented the story about the puppy. Besides, it would have been silly to actually compare a puppy with a silly mewing cat but Alex wanted to comfort her somehow.

At the rehearsal later that day each of the guards and courtiers was given a hat and Alex got a large one like a musketeer's with a wide brim and a fluffy plume.

When Olympiada Victorovna decided to rehearse the final scene, Alex began feeling thoroughly miserable because, you see, it was then that the prince finally found Cinderella, and of course, declared his love for her and almost went as far as kissing her.

Before starting the scene, Olympiada Victorovna suggested the prince took off his beret and donned a hat with feathers.

"I think this black suit and silvewy gwey, soft felt hat will look weally gwand."

"What did she say the hat's made of?" Alex asked Masha in a whisper.

"Felt. That's what almost all hats are made of."

"I see..."

The rehearsal began. The prince dropped onto his knees in front of Masha, put the slipper on her foot and declared his love for her. Olympiada Victorovna was dissatisfied.

"No, no! This won't do at all. Too little feeling. You must sound touching, weally touching but somehow you sound wather fwivolous. You make it look as if the pwince is feather-bwained."

And thereupon Alex said in a rather loud voice:

When you wear a hat made of felt,
Before you know it, your brains start to melt
And soon you find they're all feathers and down,
And not a single bit of brain's to be found.

There was a chilly silence. Olympiada Victorovna turned round slowly and glared fiercely at the villain who had dared to interrupt the proceedings.

"You've a very spiteful tongue, you know. You're intewupting our work. Please leave. You're not in this scene."

Alex went back-stage, sat on the plywood royal throne, picked up a sword someone had left behind and began drawing the word "Masha" on the dusty floor.

After the rehearsal the prince and Cinderella both came back-stage in an angry mood.

"We're not getting anywhere!" said Masha.

"What do you expect with such 'poets' around," snapped the prince and shook his white feathers towards Alex. "Making up silly little rhymes and getting in the way."

"Watch it," said Alex.

"Don't you boss me about," the prince retorted haughtily. "There was once a time when people got nailed to a wall like butterflies in a collection for making up stuff like that."

"Do you want to challenge me to a duel, then?" asked Alex hopefully.

"If you weren't a coward, I would."

"Me? A coward?!" Alex jumped up.

"You've both gone mad," said Masha as was to be expected in such an event.

The prince unfastened his cloak, dashingly swept it onto the floor and drew his sword.

Alex stuck his sword into the floor and slightly bent its blade. The prince rushed into the attack. Alex parried his blow and with his next thrust knocked a feather out of the prince's hat. Masha gasped just in case. The prince leapt back two paces and then gracefully prepared for the attack and dashed forwards again. Alex stepped to the left, letting the prince dive under his blade, and then turned and whacked his opponent across his bony velvet backside. The prince let out a howl, cast his sword aside and rushed at Alex with raised fists.

But then in walked Olympiada Victorovna.

"What's going on in here?" she asked furiously.

"He started it!" whined the sneaky prince. "Waving his sword about."

Olympiada Victorovna hissed as she inhaled air and then rasped: "Get out!" and pointed a bony finger at the door.

"Why, certainly," said Alex.

Masha caught Alex up in the yard and they quietly walked along side-by-side.

"I'm sorry," said Masha. "I didn't even manage to explain to her that you didn't start it."

"What ever next! What's the point explaining!" replied Alex cheerfully.

He was pleased Masha was walking along beside him and feeling sorry for him but did not want her to feel too sorry.

"Do you think I won't get by without this drama group?"

"I don't like it either," said Masha. "And I haven't time to spare. You know, I've also got music, gymnastics and English language classes. But what can I do? If I leave, the première will have to be cancelled. I mustn't stop the show."

"No, of course you mustn't!"

Masha fell silent, sighed and then asked quietly, "So you're not at all sorry you've left the group?"

Alex blushed and astounded by his own daring, suddenly blurted out. "Yes, I am a bit... Because from now on I'm not going to see you much..."

He could not bring himself to look at Masha and began examining his sandals instead. And so he could not tell whether Masha was smiling

or frowning. She was probably smiling for she said, "My birthday's in three days' time. Will you come? At three."

"Of course, I will!" Alex exclaimed, overjoyed, and at once took fright and asked, "Only... who else will be coming?"

"Oh, hardly anybody! Two girls from our form, my first-former cousin and Andrei Lapnikov. You don't know him. We go to the same music school. He's ever so funny and a bit fat but he plays the violin ever so well. You see, our tape-recorder's broken and so he'll play for us instead so that we can dance."

"I'm no good at dancing."

"Who is? Everyone will just do his own thing."

"But what about the prince? Will he be coming, too, then?" Alex asked gruffly and hesitantly.

"Of course not," replied Masha.

Chapter Three

For over a month Alex's father who was an archeologist had been excavating an ancient town in the desert. He sometimes wrote letters in which he described their wonderful finds and Alex and his mother really enjoyed reading them.

When Alex came home and saw his mother looking happy, he at once asked, "Heard from Daddy?"

But she replied, "No, I've got some other news. The factory's sending me on business to Leningrad for ten days. I've decided to take you with me!.."

She was amazed that Alex did not start jumping up and down and whooping with joy.

"Aren't you thrilled?"

No two boys are alike. Some in Alex's shoes would have begun dodging the issue and making up excuses. Others would have decided that no girl was worth turning down a trip to Leningrad. But Alex said. "You see, Mummy, a girl I know has her birthday in three days' time. She's invited me to her party."

No two mothers are alike either. Alex's did not get upset or angry.

"Well, in that case... I'll have to ask Auntie Dasha to look after you again."

Auntie Dasha was a pensioner, who lived in the flat next-door. Whenever Alex had to be left at home for a few days, his parents asked Auntie Dasha to help and she was always only too pleased to oblige. Alex did not mind either although he considered he was quite old enough to look after himself.

In the late afternoon his mother set off for the station after, of course, giving him lots of advice and instructions on how to cope on his own. And as she was leaving, she said, "Now, when you go to the birthday party, do try and look really smart."

"How do you mean?"

"Go to the barber's and get your hair cut. Give your neck a good scrub and do dress properly."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Alex anxiously. He had never given this a thought before. His school uniform was too drab for a party and, anyway, over the past year he had managed to wear it out at the knees and tear a hole in the elbow of his jacket. And he could not very well go in his favourite scruffy jeans and sweat-shirt as it was not the same as chasing a football in the yard.

"Wear your sailor suit."

"I... I..." said Alex hesitantly.

"What's wrong?"

"Well... I look too young in it."

His mother burst out laughing, kissed Alex and left.

But Alex fell to thinking.

Life became hard when you were invited to a birthday party. You had to think about dressing up smartly. You had to (it suddenly dawned on Alex!) look for a present. Well, that wasn't so hard. He could give her, say, a pen with four different-coloured inks. Or, if the worst came to the worst, his home-made pistol with a rubber band which fired wire bullets and which looked almost as good as a Mauser. But what should he wear?

When you're invited home for the first time by a girl whom you, well... whom you like, you want to look your best. But a sailor suit is perhaps too childish... On the other hand, it was the best thing Alex had. So he just had to make up his mind.

Alex hunted in his wardrobe for the hanger on which his sailor's jacket and shorts with a narrow blue belt had been hanging since last year, put them on and stood in front of the mirror...

It is on little details of this kind that our tale depends. If Alex's mother had not made the very casual remark about him looking his best, he would not have been so anxious that evening, and, like all other boys of his age, would have been playing football in the yard instead of hovering in front of the mirror and carefully examining his sailor's jacket. And he would not have noticed that the little golden anchor on his sleeve had worked loose or begun looking at it attentively. Neither would he have suddenly remembered that the anchors on the clipper model were almost the same. No, he would certainly not have recalled the little ship!

But he did.

If it had been the middle of a day, full of hustle and bustle, games and urgent chores, nothing at all would have happened. But it was evening and some sad music was being played on the radio (and, what's more, his mother had just gone away for ten whole days), and that was most likely why his memory of the clipper was also sad. He stopped worrying about what to wear, switched off the light, settled down on the sofa and began thinking about the little ship, and about it standing in the dusk on the chest of drawers among all those dusty hats. Sofia Alexandrovna was, of course, sitting by the window and grieving over her missing cat. And nobody cared that the little but almost real clipper was pining for the sea.

It just wasn't fair! It really wasn't!

Had the old ship-wright built his clipper for a dusty chest of drawers?

It was dark in the room but the small window was light and the television aerials on the neighbouring houses could be seen through it. The aerials looked a little like the masts of clippers with a small moon hooked onto one.

Alex thought about ships and ship-wrights and the following verses gradually formed in his head: "Once upon a time there lived a ship-wright ... who built amazing ships..."

That's how they started and this is how they finished up:

Once upon a time there lived an old ship-wright
Who smoked a pipe and dreamed of the sea.
And then one day he built a model ship —
Tiny it was but as real as can be.

Just like a frigate, a marvellous sight,
With mizzens and bowsprit, all of his labour.
But the tired old ship-wright died one night,
And the ship was left with his neighbour.

This is how Alex began his "Ballad about a Clipper". He was astonished how easily the right words came to him:

Surrounded by hats, all old and worn,
Dusty plumes and felt, rotten and faded,
How could the wonder ship not feel forlorn,
The clipper once born of the wind and sea?

Alex felt a lump in his throat as he whispered these lines to himself.

Indeed, how could it not feel forlorn? Was it right for a ship to be kept among all that moth-eaten junk? No, it should be standing in a captain's cabin by a port-hole, looking out on all the seas and continents. Or in an old sailor's flat whose walls were decorated with maps, steering-wheels and colourful Indian masks. Or on the desk of a writer of travel stories. Or in the room of a boy who very much wanted to become a captain. And not necessarily of a boy — many girls loved adventures, too. Masha, for instance, dreamed of becoming a sailor and was probably dreaming of it at that very moment.

Yes, of course she was!

If only she could have a little ship like that...

If only she could have this very ship!

It was such a fine idea that Alex began trembling with excitement.

Of course, the clipper would make the best present for Masha! Yes, why give her a pen with four different-coloured inks or a home-made pistol when the sailing ship was so wonderful?..

"What does the old lady need the clipper for?" thought Alex with vexation. "She takes no notice of it at all and talks of it as something she acquired by chance. Just imagine it: the clipper doesn't mean anything to her!"

Now Alex could think of nothing else because something terribly unfair had happened: that wonderful little ship was being totally neglected and the best girl in the world could not be given it as a present.

Oh, how happy she would be! Alex imagined Masha's sparkling eyes and seemed to hear her saying: "Oh, Alex! Oh, isn't it wonderful!"

At the thought of all this, he began fidgeting about on the sofa.

But what could he do? Perhaps he should go to Sofia Alexandrovna and ask her to sell him the ship? But it was a fine old model and not just a pen, and all he had was five rubles.

Perhaps it would be best to explain everything to her? She might just understand then and give it away to him, mightn't she?

Alex sighed. No, he would not dare tell her everything and, anyway, he would not know where to begin. After all, he could not work out for himself why Masha was better than anyone else and why she needed the little ship so much. He just felt it.

And, anyway, would Sofia Alexandrovna bother to hear him out when all she thought of was cats and hats?

Hats...

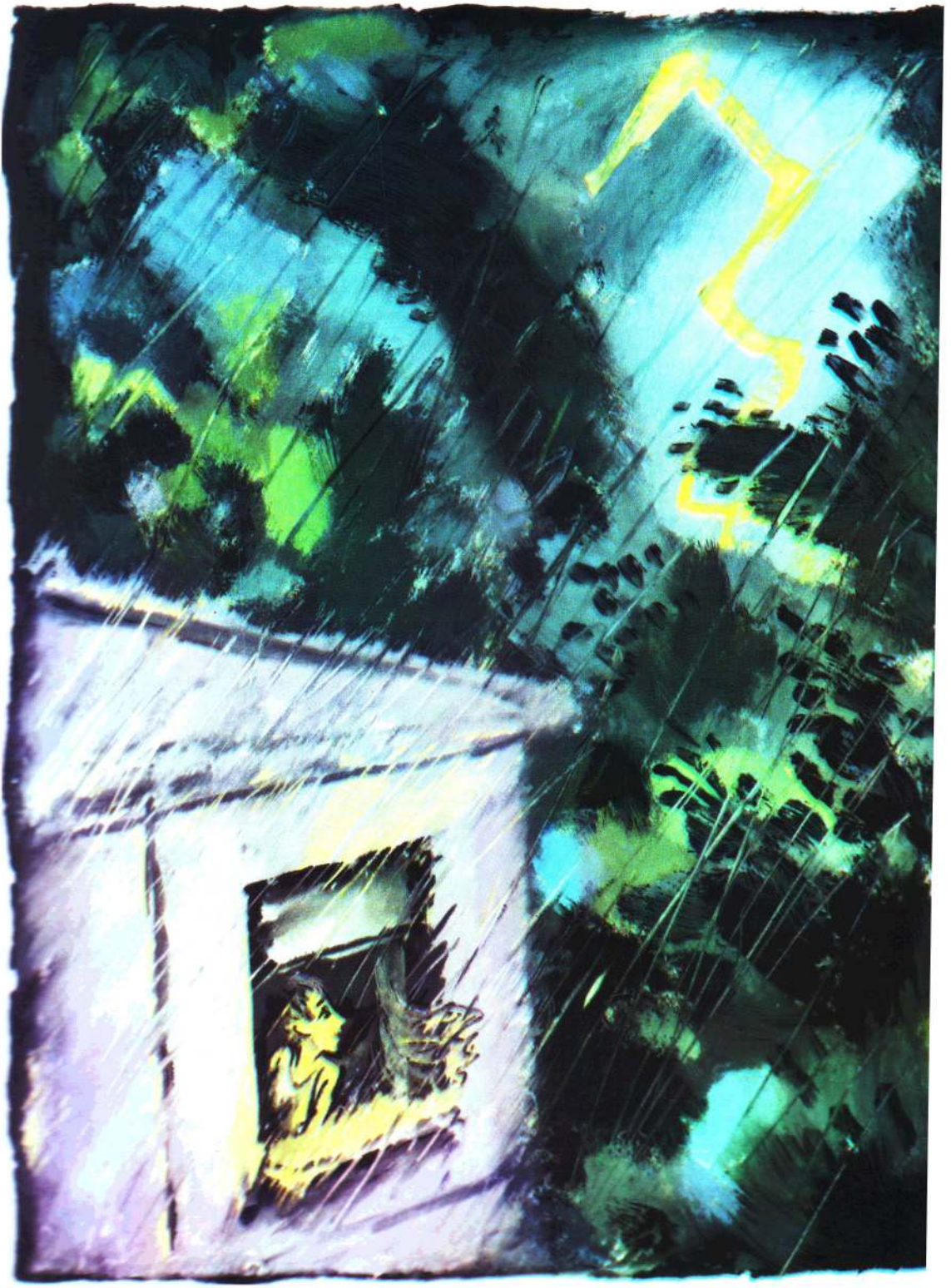
Hats!

Alex jumped up so fast that the sofa springs creaked loudly and went on twanging for a long time. He had remembered something!

In the block of flats he used to live in there was still a boy he knew called Vladik Vasilkov who had moved there two years ago from Tallinn. Now, there were lots of houses with tall chimneys in Tallinn. And you can't have chimneys without having chimney-sweeps, too! Chimney-sweeps were famous people in Tallinn. And the tall black top hats they wore were famous, too. Vladik had told him he had one that he had been given by a famous chimney-sweep. At any rate, that's what he said. Vladik Vasilkov was easy to talk round and would probably agree to swop his hat for four stamps with African fishes on them and a good penknife with four blades and a screw-driver.

Sofia Alexandrovna had plenty of hats of every kind but Alex had not noticed one quite like Vladik's. No, she probably did not have one like it in her collection. Early the next morning Alex would rush over and get this precious hat and then go and see Sofia Alexandrovna and say very politely, "Please excuse me but you have a little ship which you don't need in the least and I've got a rare hat which I don't need either. You collect hats whereas I collect models. Let's swop. We'll both only benefit from it..."

Of course, it would demand a lot of courage for it was not like swopping things with his friends but he would do it for Masha's sake



and just to free the clipper from captivity. Yes, he simply had to save the ship!

And thinking this, Alex fell fast asleep.

A thunderstorm brewed during the night. However, it was not the thunder and lightning that awoke Alex but the cold splashes of rain being swept through the open window by the wind, the curtain billowing like a sail.

Alex rushed over to slam the window shut but there was suddenly such a brilliant flash and such a tremendous bang that he stopped still and gazed out in wonder without feeling in the least afraid.

In the blue flash of light he caught sight of torrents of rain and frothy white streams gushing along the road. There was another streak of lightning and the poplars seemed to blaze with green light from within. The wind and torrents of rain raged and roared and the storm was so tremendous and fascinating that Alex could not bring himself to shut the window. He liked the way the curtain was flapping and the lampshade swinging to and fro and the fine glasses chattering with fear in the sideboard. So he simply took his mother's old raincoat off the rack and huddled under it on the sofa so that the stinging splashes of rain did not fall on his arms or legs.

The streaks of lightning came thick and fast, turning the ceiling blue as the rain outside swished and gurgled.

"The wet south-westerly roared," thought Alex.

"The rain crashed down like a wall of water..."

And he dozed off to the sound of the storm.

Chapter Four

It was a sunny morning. Lying here and there along the road were shiny puddles and maple branches which had been torn off by the storm. A gentle breeze was blowing and when Alex came out into the street, his blue sailor's collar stirred and began flapping against his back like a carnival flag. His spirits rose and he suddenly felt sure that something extraordinary was bound to happen that day.

He set off towards Vladik Vasilkov's to get the chimney-sweep's hat.

But sometimes things happen that turn all your plans upside down. He had passed two blocks when he heard a hoarse drawn-out mewing and spotted a grey cat perched on the top of a large poplar. It was wet and looked very miserable and thin. Some ferocious dogs had probably chased it up the tree the day before and the poor thing had spent the whole night out in the thunderstorm and rain. It had fled up to the top in fright and was now too scared to come down.

Screwing up his eyes, Alex spotted a large pink scratch on one of the cat's ears and almost whooped with joy —"Kuzya". He no longer needed the chimney-sweep's hat. Once she got her beloved Kuzya back, Sofia Alexandrovna would definitely want to reward his rescuer. And, after all, she had seen how impressed Alex had been by the clipper and, indeed, what did the clipper mean to her next to Kuzya?

Don't think badly of Alex: even if there had been no ship, he would still have not passed the poor cat by. But now he was even more determined and hurriedly kicked off his sandals and started climbing up the poplar's wet trunk. He found it easy climbing at first. The trunk was rough and slanting and he quickly got half-way up the tree. True, he scratched his knees and the front of his shirt got wet and crumpled but this did not worry him in the least.

Then the trunk branched and he had to crawl along some slippery boughs to reach Kuzya. When he finally got near enough, he tried to pick it up gently but the silly cat closed its eyes tight, let out a protracted wail and dug its claws deep into the bark. So Alex had to grab it by the scruff of the neck and pull it off the bough. As soon as it broke loose, Kuzya sank its claws into Alex's shoulder and the latter let out a stifled howl and flopped down to the ground where some sympathetic onlookers had gathered.

"What a little hero!" said a tall man with a moustache.

"The poor little cat's had a terrible time," sighed a woman in a bright-coloured blouse. "And the poor thing probably doesn't have a home."

Feeling it was close to the ground, the "poor thing" relaxed its grip but its eyes were still tightly shut and its ears flattened.

"I know its owner," Alex replied gruffly, groping for his sandals with his feet. His scratched shoulder and knees were stinging.

"Never mind," he thought. "After all, it's evidence that I took a lot of trouble and even a risk getting the brute back."

And, shuffling along in his unbuckled sandals, Alex carried Kuzya back to Sofia Alexandrovna's little house.

The house turned out to be empty. Its window-panes were broken, its door unhinged and the chimney on its roof had caved in. Its corners were even more crooked than before and stuffing was sticking out of the cracks in its damp walls.

Completely baffled, Alex peered inside and saw that its empty rooms were flooded with black water in which scraps of paper and a three-legged chair were bobbing about.

He hugged Kuzya, who was limp after his ordeal, and began walking round the outside of the house.

It was obvious that the night's rainstorm had done its worst here. Torrents of water had washed away the soil and pushed the house even nearer the gully. Bushes had been wrenched out of the ground on the slope where the water had been gushing downhill all night.

A girl aged about eight with long straight hair the colour of ripe corn was sitting on an upturned bucket right on the edge of the gully. She was holding a huge-eyed doll on her lap and softly singing a strange ditty:

Yonder in the country
Grass and trees will grow.
Fear not the wild beasts
In the forests where you go,
But beware of the grey mouse
For that's your main foe.
And when it joins the tale,
It's sure to bring woe.

"Hello there!" called Alex. "What happened here? Where's Sofia Alexandrovna?"

The little girl raised her limpid eyes towards Alex.

"What happened?" she repeated in a sing-song voice. "The rains came down and flooded the house. And Sofia Alexandrovna's nephew came and took her away to a new flat. He's been trying to persuade her to move for a long time but just couldn't get her to.

But this time he didn't need to. He arrived early in the morning in his car, loaded all her belongings and off they went. The house is going to slide into the gully before long..."

An ill foreboding caused Alex's heart to sink.

"But what about her things?" he asked. "Was anything damaged?"

"Not half!" sighed the little girl. "The flood carried away her night-table and two Spanish hats. And her little ship. It was so lovely, too. Its glass box stayed put but the ship's completely disappeared..."

"I just knew it!" thought Alex in despair.

But the little girl went on, "Sofia Alexandrovna was terribly upset about the hats. And she felt sorry about the ship, too. She didn't mind about the table but she was very sorry about the ship. She said she should have given it as a present to that boy."

Alex was so surprised, he dropped his arms and Kuzya flopped onto the ground. Then he absent-mindedly picked him up again.

"Why, it's Kuzya!" exclaimed the little girl joyfully. "I didn't recognise him. So you've found my little poppet? Give him to me and I'll take him to Sofia Alexandrovna. She'll be so happy."

She stood up, put her doll on the bucket and straightened. She looked very small and fragile in her sun-bleached blue dress with white polka. And Alex suddenly felt as if he had seen her somewhere before but could not remember where. He handed the cat over to her and it began purring in her arms.

"What boy did she mean to give the ship away to?" asked Alex, almost crying with disappointment.

"The one who was here yesterday. Who else? She doesn't know any others."

"Really," said Alex. "Then I'll go down and have a look in the gully. The ship might be stuck in the bushes. It can't have been swept very far away."

He stepped towards the edge of the gully and grabbed hold of a bush.

"Don't go there!" said the little girl quickly. "You'll only get covered in mud and scratched. There's nothing down there. Sofia Alexandrovna's nephew climbed down in his rubber boots and hunted for her hats and other things but he didn't find a sausage. The stream's swept it all away."

"But I just might find it..."

"You won't catch up with anything that's been swept away," objected the girl quietly but so confidently that Alex stopped in his tracks.

"Why?"

"Because you won't..."

"Bother her!" thought Alex. "I'll go down and have a look."

"Stop, Alex," said the little girl.

"Why, do you know me?" he asked in surprise.

"A bit," she replied craftily.

It was all so baffling. He felt disturbed and yet hopeful... So he went up to her and said, "Look... Perhaps you know where I should look for the ship?"

"Nope," she answered, looking gravely at him, thought for a moment and then added suddenly, "No, I don't. But I'll help you find out."

Alex smirked and asked doubtfully, "Are you a witch, then?"

"Sort of," she replied without a smile.

"All right, help me then," said Alex with a hint of irony.

"Go to the corner of May 1st and Garden Street and you'll come across an information office..."

"There's a shoe repairs booth there, that's all," interrupted Alex. "Stop having me on."

The little girl did not take offence.

"Just listen to me. It all depends. For some it's a shoe repairs booth and for others, an information office. There's an old man working there who knows all there is to know in the world."

"How come you know about this old man?"

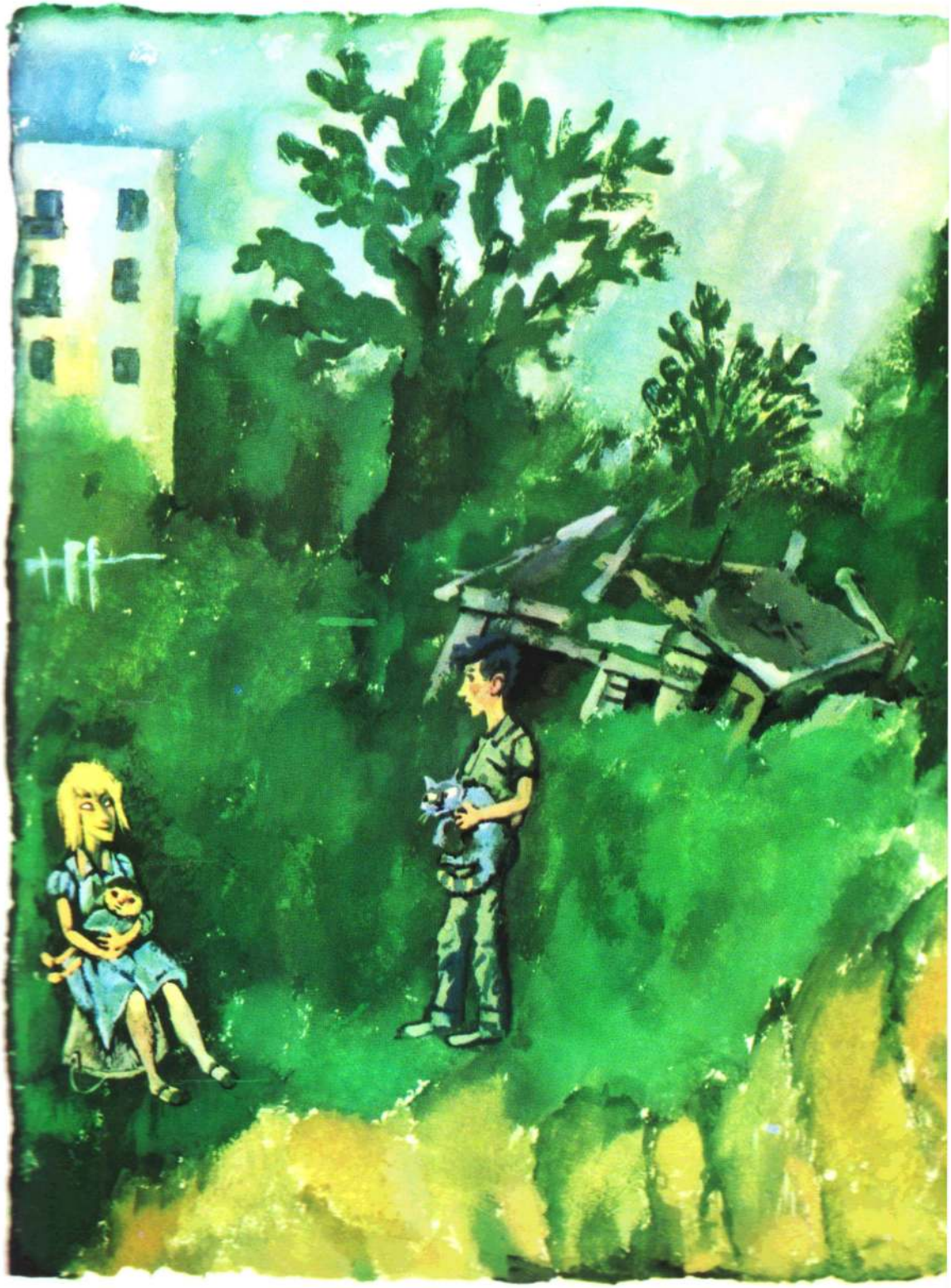
"He's my Granddad."

"And he's a wizard, too, of course?" asked Alex rather sarcastically.

"Of course," said the little girl earnestly. "Only he doesn't like it when people bother him with questions. You've got to know how to approach him. So, go up to the booth and just stand there for a while and then say as if to yourself something like, 'I wonder where I could get hold of a magic carpet?' And if Granddad's in a good mood, he'll tell you."

"And what if he isn't?"

"Don't worry, he's feeling fine today."



"Mmm... I see..." said Alex. "But why have you suddenly decided to help me?"

The tips of the little girl's ears turned bright pink but she continued to stare gravely at him.

"Because you're handsome and brave," she said quietly.

"Who? Me?!" asked Alex in astonishment.

"Yes, you of course. You weren't even scared to climb all that way up to rescue Kuzya. Look how scratched you've got but that didn't stop you."

"Oh, come on," mumbled Alex. "Why are you poking fun at me?"

"I'm not," said the little girl, and then clutched Kuzya against her cotton frock and ran off.

"Well, I suppose you could just about say I was brave," thought Alex. "But as for being handsome... Fancy making up a thing like that!" Then he remembered the little girl's truthful eyes and believed her, that is, believed what she had said about the information bureau and her grandfather and decided to try it out.

Knocked together out of plywood, the booth was squat and flimsy-looking. It was a wonder it had not been blown away by the previous night's storm. Its door was open and so Alex walked in.

Sitting in a corner, which was partitioned off by a wide board serving as a counter, was a gaunt old man in a black beret with a little tip, with a pair of spectacles perched on his bulbous nose and grey stubble on his cheeks. He was hammering a boot on a thin iron shoe-tree in front of him and muttering quietly to himself.

"Hello..." said Alex bashfully.

The old man did not reply.

"Oh well, he must be in a huff," thought Alex and began looking round. The walls of the booth were lined with ordinary-looking shelves of wooden lasts and shoes and pested with colour pictures which had been cut out of magazines and an old calendar. A crooked wall clock with a large rusty padlock instead of weight was ticking away in a corner.

Gazing at this padlock, Alex said absent-mindedly, "I wonder if it's possible to find the little ship now that it's been swept away by the stream goodness knows where?"

Alex heard the old man stop tapping the boot and chuckle quietly. "Is the little ship yours, then?"

Alex became confused. Of course, the clipper wasn't his but then Sofia Alexandrovna had wanted to give it to him as a present...

"Yes ... almost," said Alex and looked askance at the old man who did not seem angry and even smiled.

"Almost?" he asked.

"He knows everything," thought Alex and felt very awkward.

"Well ... not quite," he began explaining. "But, you see, it doesn't belong to anyone now that it's been abandoned... According to maritime law, even a real ship that's been abandoned, becomes the property of the person who finds it."

The old man cackled with laughter.

"My, you old sea-dog. A real admiral, you are... But how come you've decided to ask me about something like this? Who put you up to it?"

"Your Granddaughter," said Alex reluctantly.

"I see... Well, did you catch her eye, then, Alex?"

"Really! Whatever next!" exclaimed Alex and felt himself blushing.

"Now, now, don't get excited," smirked the old man and then added, "The little ship can be found but you'll have to travel a long way... It was swept away by a stream, you say? All streams run into rivers and all rivers flow into the sea. And on the shore of the bluest sea stands the town of Vetrogorsk. And this town has a Museum of Wonderful Sea Discoveries and Ships, otherwise known simply as the Ship Museum. Now, the Museum's Curator has a lot to do but what he likes best is collecting models of ships. And he's so good at it and so fond of little ships that he has a simply amazing knack of not missing a single model. He attracts them like a magnet, and no matter where a little ship has got lost and no matter where it has been swept to by the waves, it is bound to land up in Vetrogorsk sooner or later. It's as if little ships have a special instinct guiding them, rather like migratory birds. For instance, some little boys lost their model brigantine yesterday and today you'll find the Curator's already got it in his Museum... Go and search for it if you like but you'll have to travel far."

"It's just like a fairy-tale," said Alex.

"But of course!" the old man replied eagerly. "That's just what it is."

"A real one?"

"Well, that I can't tell you..." replied the old man, looking attentively and even sternly at him. "I don't know, Alex. That depends on you. See for yourself."

"But ... what am I to see? What's meant to happen?"

"Well, just you remember this, Alex. All real fairy-tales are about someone looking for someone else. Little Ivanushka was searching for his sister Alyonushka, Tsarevich Ivan for Maria Morevna and the little Star-Child for his mother who had been carried away by the evil wizard."

"That's true. And in the 'Snow Queen' Gerda was searching for Kai."

"Yes, and the Prince for Cinderella."

Alex did not like being reminded of the prince and so angrily decided to object: "But not all tales are like that. Some heroes are looking for the feather of a fire-bird or something or other. And not all princes are the same either..."

"That's true.. But why a feather of a fire-bird? They aren't getting it for themselves, you know, but so as to save their beloved from destruction or find a good friend."

"But, you know, I'm not searching for the little ship for myself either," said Alex in a slightly offended tone. "I want to give it ... to a good friend... Well, I mean, she most likely doesn't know that I'm her real friend yet but I very much want to be friends with her."

"But can't you be without the little ship?"

"Of course we can! Do you think I want to buy her friendship with the little ship? No, simply it's her birthday and the clipper would make the very best present for her! Do you know how happy she'll be!"

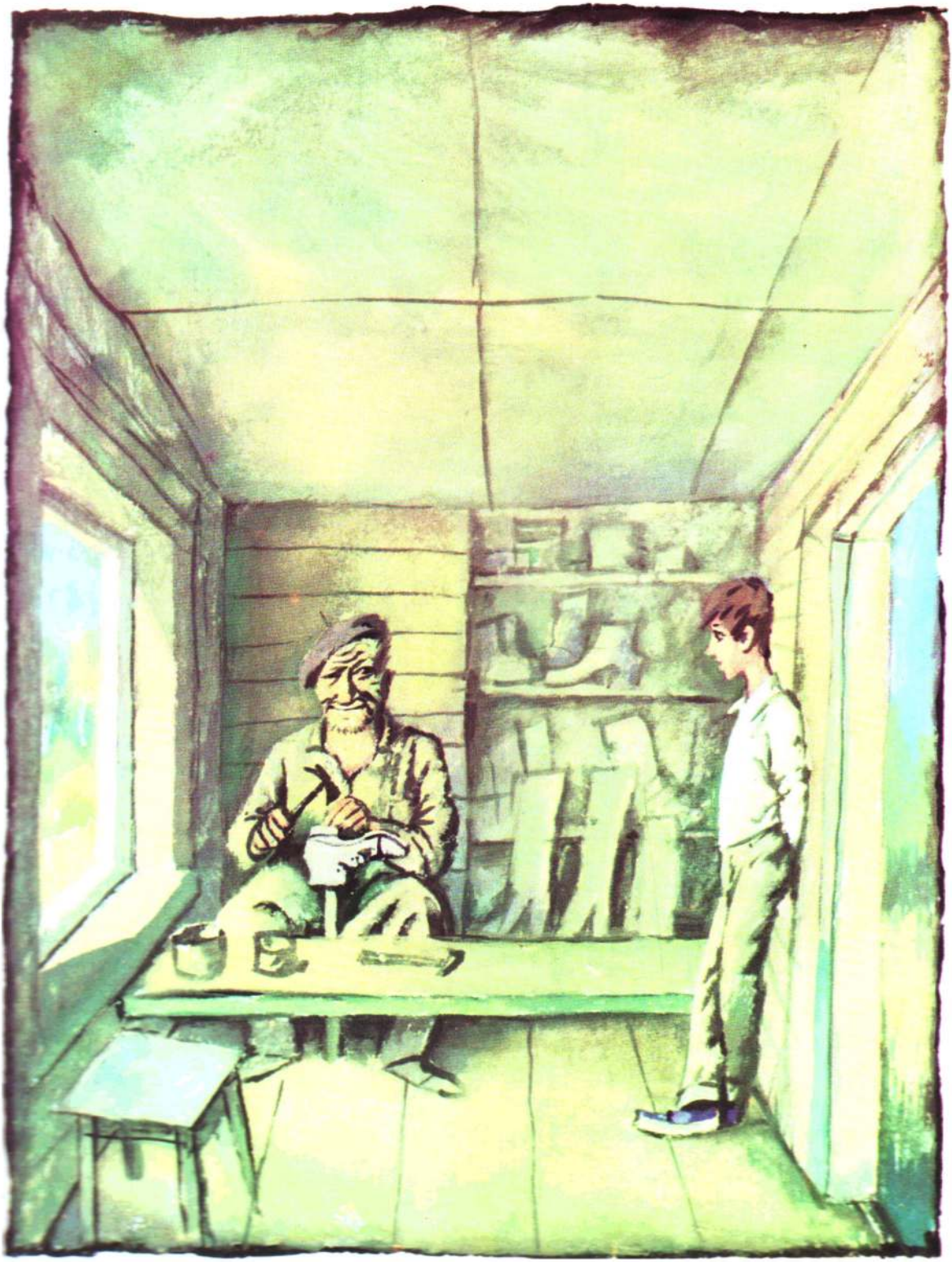
"Well, if she'll be happy, that's fine," said the old man pensively and added solemnly, "Joy is a very important thing for us... Well, have a go, Alex, since you've made up your mind to. I'll give you some advice."

"Thank you!"

"You say that at the end of the tale, Alex. Now just listen. You need a ticket to Vetrogorsk..."

"Right!"

"So go along to the Travel Agency where you can get tickets for trains, planes, buses, flying carp... well, I mean, tickets of all kinds."



"You mean, in May lst Street?"

"No, there's another one in Polar Captains' Street."

Alex had never heard of that street before.

"Where exactly is it?"

"Why, don't you know?" asked the old man slyly. "Listen, you go all the way along Garden Street until you come to an old stadium..."

"Oh, I know! Last winter we played a war game there."

"That's right. But don't go past it. Find the gap in its fence, go straight through it and keep going and when you've crossed the stadium, crawl through another gap and you'll come out in Polar Captains' Street. You'll find the agency at Number Twenty-Two on the left-hand side... Well, off you go."

"Thank you!"

"There's no need to thank me yet. And one more thing. If you encounter something dangerous, strange or puzzling, say, on your way, don't try and avoid it because it's all part of the fairy-tale. Well, and don't forget the most important thing and put your best foot forward."

"Right, I'll be off."

"Go, Alex, and try not to let anything amaze you."

Chapter Five

Alex at once believed that he was entering a fairy-tale world. You see, he was a poet, no matter how small, and all poets, great and small, in their heart of hearts believe in fairy-tales.

But the street he was going down was very ordinary. And so were the buses rolling past, and the people coming towards him, and the watering-machine trundling along and spraying everyone in its path. And so was the way passers-by hurled abuse after it. And so was the stadium's old fence made of rough grey planks.

One plank had been ripped out. Alex crawled through the gap (and there was nothing out of the ordinary about that either), and found his way under the wooden stands and onto the field.

The old stadium had not been used for a long time and its field was overgrown with tall grass.

White, bay and black horses were grazing on it a long way off but as soon as Alex stepped onto the grass, they all raised their heads

as if by a signal, and stared in his direction. Alex even felt alarmed and slowed down. Then a golden chestnut with a beautiful proud head and kind eyes came cautiously towards him, stopped three feet away, and gazed inquiringly, and somewhat sadly at him. And he understood her. No, he did not hear her but understood her when she asked, "Please excuse me but aren't you the boy who's looking for a horse to gallop to the Magic Kingdom?"

"Gosh! This is it," thought Alex with a tremor of excitement but said aloud, "No. I've got to go somewhere else."

"I'm sorry," sighed the horse and slowly walked away.

The other horses looked expectantly at her and then began cropping the grass again.

A fragile and tinkling silence concealing secrets reigned over the stadium. There were also a great many grasshoppers chirping and hopping this way and that at every step Alex made through the silky grass.

He crossed the field, found a hole in the fence and came out into Polar Captains' Street — a quiet, ordinary-looking street with old one- and two-storey houses.

Also old, Number Twenty-Two had most likely been built by a merchant in the last century. The upper floor had been his living quarters and the lower one a shop.

On the balcony's cast-iron railing over the front door Alex caught sight of a long blue sign with "Travel Agency" painted on it.

The ground-floor windows were decorated with colourful Aeroflot posters and the model of an IL-62 jet was hanging from a nylon cord.

Alex heaved the heavy door open with his shoulder.

The Agency was ordinary-looking and empty inside. A large fan was whirring lazily under the ceiling. The walls were lined with railway and air timetables. There was also a no-smoking sign and a notice about various excursions written in red crayon. Alex looked closer and a chill ran up his spine:

"APPLICATIONS FOR EXCURSIONS
ON MAGIC CARPETS
WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED
UNTIL AUGUST 15
THE MANAGEMENT."

A high partition with small windows ran along the far wall. All the windows were closed except for one, marked number two, which was slightly open. Alex went up, sighed, plucked up courage, and then tapped.

The window flew open and a cashier's head appeared.

Alex felt even more scared because the cashier looked very like his geography teacher, Klavdia Mikhailovna. She had the same smooth grey hair, stern glasses and alert eyes. Whenever anyone with eyes like hers looked at Alex he felt completely transparent.

"What can I do for you?" asked the cashier.

"I'm sorry but... I was told I could buy a ticket to Vetrogorsk here."

The cashier's eye-brows rose slightly.

"Yes, you can... But I'm curious to know who told you about it?"

"There's an information bureau or rather a booth — it's not really an information bureau. I was told by an old man who works there..."

The cashier's eyes grew kinder.

"I see. An old man. So, you've got some important business in Vetrogorsk, have you?"

"Rather!"

"Right. You're lucky, there's one ticket left on today's train. You'd better hurry because it leaves in thirty-five minutes' time."

"And how much does it cost?" asked Alex, recollecting suddenly that his mother had left him only five rubles as pocket money. What if it was not enough?

"Four rubles and ninety kopecks. That's just for a seat. You'll have to make do without a berth".

Alex nodded joyfully and slipped his hand into his posket for the money.

But there wasn't any. Worse still, there wasn't even a pocket where there usually was one. Then he realised he had changed clothes the evening before and left his money in his old trousers.

"What's wrong? You look so..."

"I've forgotten my money," said Alex in a whisper. "Now I can't possibly make it."

The cashier also became upset.

"My, what scatter-brains all you boys are. And you're so messy and undisciplined! When will there be an end to it?"

Alex went on standing silently by the window although there was no longer any point in him doing so.

"Well, what am I to do with you now?" asked the cashier.

Alex's hopes rose.

"Tell me what you've got to do in Vetrogorsk," ordered the cashier.

Alex felt his ears glowing and most likely turning pink.

"Well... there's this girl. It's her birthday soon. And there's this museum in Vetrogorsk..."

The cashier smiled gently.

"I see. This is a special case. What you need is a Green Pass on all forms of transport there and back. After all, you've got to be back the day after tomorrow."

Alex shrugged his shoulders in dismay. It made no difference now, did it? After all, he did not have any money, and the special ticket was bound to cost more than an ordinary one.

"The Green Pass does not have a fixed price," explained the cashier. "But it's very expensive for it costs exactly as much as the passenger has on him. No more, no less... Have you got anything at all?"

Alex quickly slipped his fingers into the side pocket under his belt and felt a three-kopeck coin. It had been lying there ever since the summer before when he had tossed all his silver coins into the sea as he was leaving the Crimea and this copper coin was all that was left.

"Here..." said Alex hesitantly. "But surely it's..."

"Let's have it," interrupted the cashier. She slammed the punch down hard and gave Alex a piece of green cardboard.

"The ticket's valid until four the day after tomorrow."

"Thank you! Good-bye!" cried Alex and raced towards the door.

"Wait!"

"But the train's..."

"Don't hurry. You don't need the train now... If you go down the side-streets past the old church and Cosmos cinema, you'll come out into Faraway Street..."

Alex nodded. He had never heard of Faraway Street but he knew the Cosmos Cinema.

"Go right down to the end of this street and then keep going along the path until you come out onto the riverbank. Sit down and wait. A steamboat will arrive at four..."

"A steamboat?" repeated Alex in amazement. "Why, but our river's so small even rowing boats run aground in it!"

"Don't argue, Alex," said the cashier wearily. "Off you go. Now, don't hurry but don't dally either. The steamboat will arrive at four sharp."

Alex recalled the horses in the stadium and the notices about the flying carpets and realised it was silly to argue.

"I'll even have time to pack a few things," he thought. "And I'll tell Auntie Dasha that I'm going to Val Yakovlev's country cottage."

Chapter Six

Faraway Street was very old indeed. Its little houses and fences stood knee-deep in burdocks. Its road was overgrown with bright yellow dandelions and its ditches with ox-eye daisies. Tall blades of grass were sticking through chinks in its narrow wooden pavement and its planks gently gave way underfoot. And there was nobody to be seen.

Alex was dressed for a hike in a green shirt and an old pair of track trousers, and he had taken along the jacket he travelled to summer camp in just in case. He had shoved two buttered sandwiches into his back pocket but held onto the Green Pass because he was afraid to put it with the sandwiches in case it got smeared with butter!

The pass was as green as a fresh poplar leaf. Alex looked more closely at the faintly printed pictures of an airplane, train, steamer and bus in its corners. A black number — OS 100743 — ran along the top and "For Special Cases" was printed in small red letters underneath. In the middle of the pass was a large printed notice: "Valid on all forms of Transport. Return", and then just below "Vetrogorsk". In the bottom corner a blue square stamp said "Travel Agency. Booking-Office Number 2". It certainly looked as if the pass was real and Alex could not believe he had paid only three kopecks for it...

The street ended or, rather, the houses did, and the wooden pavement and ditches continued and beyond them stretched a meadow as far as the eye could see. Then the pavement ended and an

overgrown path ran on ahead. The grass began rustling at his feet.

Alex felt as if he was swimming across a green sea except that he could hear no surf but only rustling grass and incessantly chirring grasshoppers. The sky and its small white clouds seemed to be swaying above him and drifting towards him.

And then all of a sudden he spotted the river. How beautiful it looked! It was small, no wider than an average lane, and the golden sand on its bed gleamed through its dark waters. Dragonflies were darting here and there. Alder bushes grew along its banks. But how could a steamer possibly get here when even a small boat would hardly manage to?

"It was a joke!" thought Alex. "I've been tricked into buying a useless ticket for three kopecks! And like a fool I believed it all!" He sat down by the water's edge, feeling bitterly disappointed.

But he did not have to feel sad for long. In the distance he heard a strange puffing as if a steam-engine was caught in the grass. Belching smoke, a large blue funnel with silver stars was moving round the bend over the high bushes.

Alex jumped up.

The steamer came crawling round the bend. It was a white double-decker, obviously very old. Its flat green bottom was scraping along the sandy river-bed and its huge paddle-wheels were too big for the river and hung over the bank, digging into the earth with their red blades and cutting down bushes. It was rumbling along the river like a tractor and resembled a sea monster which had scrambled onto dry land.

Alex stared hard and could not believe his eyes. But whether he believed them or not, the puffing steamer came up close and he had to jump aside so as not to get struck by a paddle.

The steamer sighed like a tired whale and came to a standstill. A gangway made of two planks with cross-beams came crashing down right by Alex's sandals. By the entrance on board appeared a very large and very fat man in a smart white uniform. He had a fair forked beard, shaggy grey hair, a brick-red face and a nose like a tomato. His naval cap looked minute, perched somewhere on the back of his vast head.

Alex at once realised that he must be the Captain.

"Young man!" boomed the Captain so loudly that the grass

swayed. "I hope you're the passenger with the Green Pass? If you are, I would like to welcome you aboard my ship!"

Alex climbed on board, still blinking with astonishment.

"Welcome aboard!" roared the Captain, stretching out his hand. "This is a very great pleasure! At last I've got a real passenger, the sort my steamer is intended for." He lowered his voice and continued, "You won't believe how fed up I am of taking all kinds of odd bods, wretched business folk and lazy tourists. Just have a look at that lot!"

He squinted towards the fore deck where several men in straw boaters were sitting in wicker chairs as if they were on a bus, with large briefcases on their laps, and their eyes fixed straight ahead.

The Captain snorted sarcastically and said, "They got on board by pulling strings. And now they're annoyed I've changed course because of my passenger with the Green Pass. Never mind, my dears, you can wait..."

"Surely you haven't forced your way up this river just because of me?" asked Alex in amazement.

"But of course! Two hours ago we received a radiogram saying you would be waiting for us here."

"But you know... It's such a huge steamer and the river's so small I just can't believe it."

The Captain grinned and looked as pleased as Punch. "Fiddlesticks! If needs be, my little ship will even paddle across the Sahara Desert although, strictly speaking, the Sahara isn't a sea at all."

"Of course," agreed Alex. "A steamer gets on much better at sea."

The Captain looked approvingly at him.

"By Jove, I like you, young man. Allow me to invite you to lunch with me and then I'll accompany you to your cabin."

Alex readily agreed because he was really famished! He liked the Captain and, in general, everything was working out splendidly.

Puffing and rocking, the steamer headed back stern first, while the Captain and Alex set off to have lunch.

In the mess a lanky sailor with a long face and a dismal-looking nose was sitting at a laid table and picking at a rissole with his fork.

"Let me introduce you," said the Captain to Alex. "This is my First Mate."

"Hello," mumbled Alex.

The sailor raised himself slightly, silently bowed his head and then downed some yoghurt and said sourly, "By your leave, I've already had lunch. So if you don't mind, I'll go and check the watches."

"That would be awfully kind of you," said the Captain.

The sailor slouched towards the door and disappeared from sight.

Gazing after him, the Captain said with conviction, "He's a bore and the world's worst First Mate. I know it's wrong to wash your dirty linen in public, so to speak, but I simply can't keep it to myself. Incidentally, those are his protégés in the deckchairs and whenever I object, he writes complaints about me to our head office."

The Captain sighed, took his cap off, invited Alex to sit down and then squeezed himself into a chair.

They ate in silence. The Captain was lost in sad thought. Every now and then he sighed so loudly that the curtain fluttered against the window and Alex caught sight of the bushes drifting past. Their branches were no longer scraping along the window-panes, and the steamer's paddles were now sloshing loudly through the water.

Towards the end of the meal the Captain cheered up and said to Alex, "I can offer you a choice of cabins. There're first-class cabins and luxury ones with a bath, television and so on. But I'd advise you to take a super-luxury one. I assure you it's most suitable for anyone who's not too old. Many people ask to be put there but I don't let them."

He took Alex to the upper deck whose sides were lined with lifeboats, unlaced the tarpaulin covering one of them and flung it aside.

"Here we are!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Here you can live under the stars and marvel at the water and shores. It's wonderfully peaceful and quiet up here and the wind's warm. And..." he lowered his voice, "nobody'll get on your nerves."

"Oh, how fantastic!" exclaimed Alex. "You mean, I can sleep here?"

"Of course you can. You'll be brought an air-bed."

...The evening came quickly. The sunset flared up and quickly died away over the water. The river was now so wide that you could hardly make out its banks.

Alex snuggled down in the lifeboat. The Little Bear constellation swayed gently over him and he felt asleep to the sound of lapping water and the steamer's even puffing.

He was awoken by steps which were cautious but heavy as if a hippopotamus was creeping up on him. He sat up and saw the Captain standing by the lifeboat.

"I beg your pardon," he said in a whisper which sent ripples across the tarpaulin cover. "I hope I haven't disturbed you? The fact is... I have something important to discuss with you. Or rather an offer to make you... You wouldn't by any chance agree to being my First Mate?"

Alex almost jumped up with surprise.

"What?"

"There's nothing to it. Being my First Mate. It's not a bad job at all."

"But... It's such important work. You've got to know the ropes."

"I assure you, you'll learn! Where there's a will..."

"Yes ... but you've already got a First Mate."

"I'll sack him!" declared the Captain. "Or leave him on a desert island where he can write as many complaints as he likes. He's more trouble than he's worth."

Alex kept silent. He, of course, could not agree, but was afraid of offending the Captain by turning his offer down.

"Do agree," urged the Captain. "You'll never regret it. You'll see more far-off seas and wonderful islands than in all the sea adventures ever written. I promise you exciting experiences almost every day. Incidentally, there're still real pirates in the mouth of the River Jil-Baldeo..."

"This is all really terrific," Alex began cautiously, "but, you see, I've got some important business which means more to me than anything else. And you can't give up things that matter most."

"I see," said the Captain sadly. "Everyone has his own way to go. I understand you and I'm not in the least offended. But I am very sorry. Good night."

Alex woke up late, or, rather, was awoken by the Captain inviting him to breakfast.

Afterwards they went up onto the bridge. It was a cloudless morning and the big river gleamed like fish-scales in the sunlight. The steamer turned towards the bank and the Captain said, "I could take you straight to Petrogorsk but it would take many days. You'll get there faster by plane. There's a small airfield half an hour's walk away

from here. Show your pass at the ticket office and you'll be put straight onto a plane."

Alex felt rather sad. He had already got used to the steamer and its Captain but he had his own way to go. And when the steamer dug its prow into the sand, he said, "Good-bye. Farewell!"

"Best of luck," replied the Captain.

Chapter Seven

The steamer cast off from the bank and began splashing downstream. Alex waved after it and then threw his jacket over his shoulder and set off down the path.

The path ran up and down hillocks and twisted between huge shiny speckled boulders and dense blooming eglantine thickets. Now and then the bushes covered the path and he had to pick his way through them.

About a kilometre later Alex came out onto a clearing with a carpet of yellow dandelions and caught sight of a sturdy four-cornered stone pillar which looked like the base of an old monument. White arrows had been drawn on different parts of it and next to them were the following inscriptions:

MAGIC KINGDOM
STATE FARM
ENCHANTED FOREST
MERMAID CREEK
VEHICLE DEPOT No. 4

And so on. In fact, the whole pillar was marked with white arrows.

"My goodness," said Alex but did not feel very surprised.

Near the base of the pillar among the dandelions he found an arrow marked with the word "Airfield". Alex looked where it was pointing to and started picking his way again between the boulders and eglantine bushes.

Before long from a hillock he spotted a field overgrown with ox-eye daisies, and two small houses on the other side of it, one light brown with a tall aerial and the other covered in large red and white checks. A long white balloon with black horizontal stripes, used for

gauging the wind was hanging on a long pole above the chequered house. There was hardly any wind and the sausage-like balloon was hanging almost still.

Alex walked through the grass and daisies towards the small houses. Birds were twittering somewhere in the grass or the sky. The air was warm and caressing and the sun was rather hot. Everything seemed fine but for some strange reason Alex suddenly began feeling uneasy. He could not understand why at first but then he guessed it was because there were no planes on the field.

There was not a single one to be seen and the field was totally empty.

What would he fly in, then?

It was only when he had almost reached the houses that he spotted a plane, but it looked more as if it was used for aerobatics or instruction than carrying passengers in. It was small, light and almost transparent. The tall grass was partly covering it, and Alex could not see it properly. He was anxious now to meet someone and find out how to get to Vetrogorsk.

Beside the brown house stood two birches with a swing hanging between them. A boy, slightly smaller than Alex, with rather tousled, very fair hair was sitting on it. He was wearing a white tee-shirt with a light blue stripe just under its collar. He was very suntanned. On his lap he was holding a map-case which was only slightly darker than his scratched thin legs.

"My, how tanned he is!" marvelled Alex. "And his hair's been bleached white. He's probably a pilot's son and has flown in from the South. Around here you can only get that tanned by the end of the summer and then only if you try really hard. But there's no way you can do so in June."

The boy did not notice Alex as he was looking down and lazily swinging to and fro, pushing himself off with his sandals' toe-caps.

"Perhaps I should ask him about planes to Vetrogorsk?" thought Alex but at that moment he spotted two dark blue signs marked "Ticket Office" and "Controller's Office" on the door of the house.

He ran onto the porch and pushed the door open.

In the corridor he saw a ticket-office window. It was shut. He tapped shyly on it. Nothing happened. He turned towards an inner door which was covered with black oil-cloth and had a "No Admittance" sign on it.

What should he do now? Go and ask the boy? But he was not a cashier or a controller, was he? Plucking up courage, Alex pulled the door open.

The Controller was seated at a desk in the room which was fitted out with all sorts of strange equipment, radio transmitters and telephones. He was wearing a white shirt, his blue jacket with stripes on its sleeves was hanging on the back of his chair, and his uniform cap was lying on a pile of papers. He was angrily munching an apple, making marks with a red pencil in a large exercise-book and did not notice Alex.

"Good afternoon," said Alex in the doorway, addressing the back of the Controller's bald head.

The Controller stopped munching but went on making marks and asked, "What do you want?"

Strictly speaking, Alex should have been taken aback by such a cold reception but he only felt slightly annoyed.

"I've got to get to Vetrogorsk!" he said loudly.

"Really? Is that all?"

"Well... yes," replied Alex not so loudly.

"Then, what business is it of mine?"

"Well ... I wanted to show my ticket but the ticket-office's shut. I wanted to ask you..."

"There'll be no planes today," said the Controller, lifting his head and putting his cap on. He had bushy eyebrows and a strong square chin.

"My, he's tough," thought Alex. "He's most likely an ex-pilot who used to fly to the Arctic." Generally speaking, he liked the look of the Controller but did not like the way he spoke.

"There'll be no planes, got it? So that's that."

"What shall I do?" asked Alex plaintively.

"I don't know."

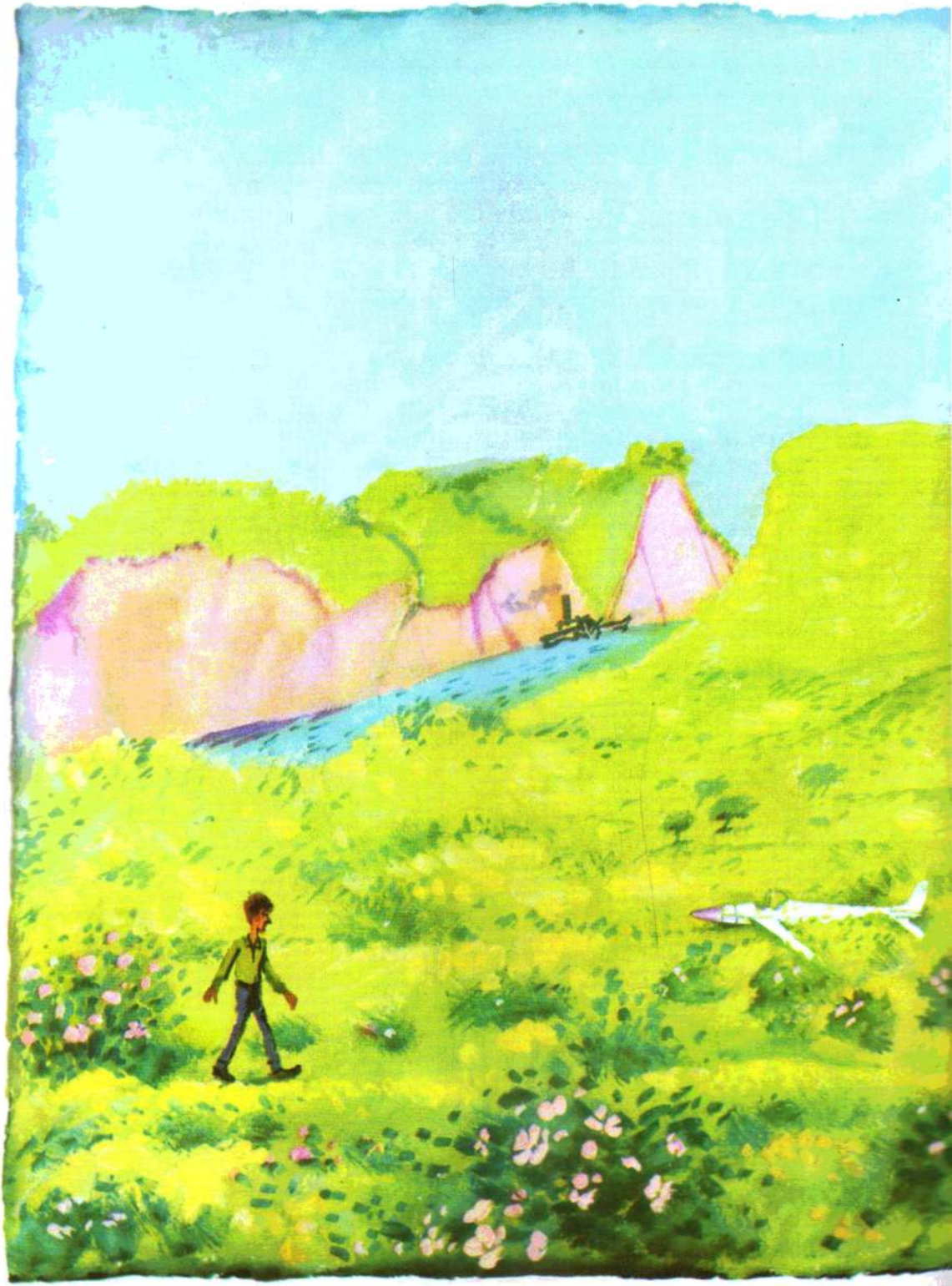
"But I really need to get to Vetrogorsk."

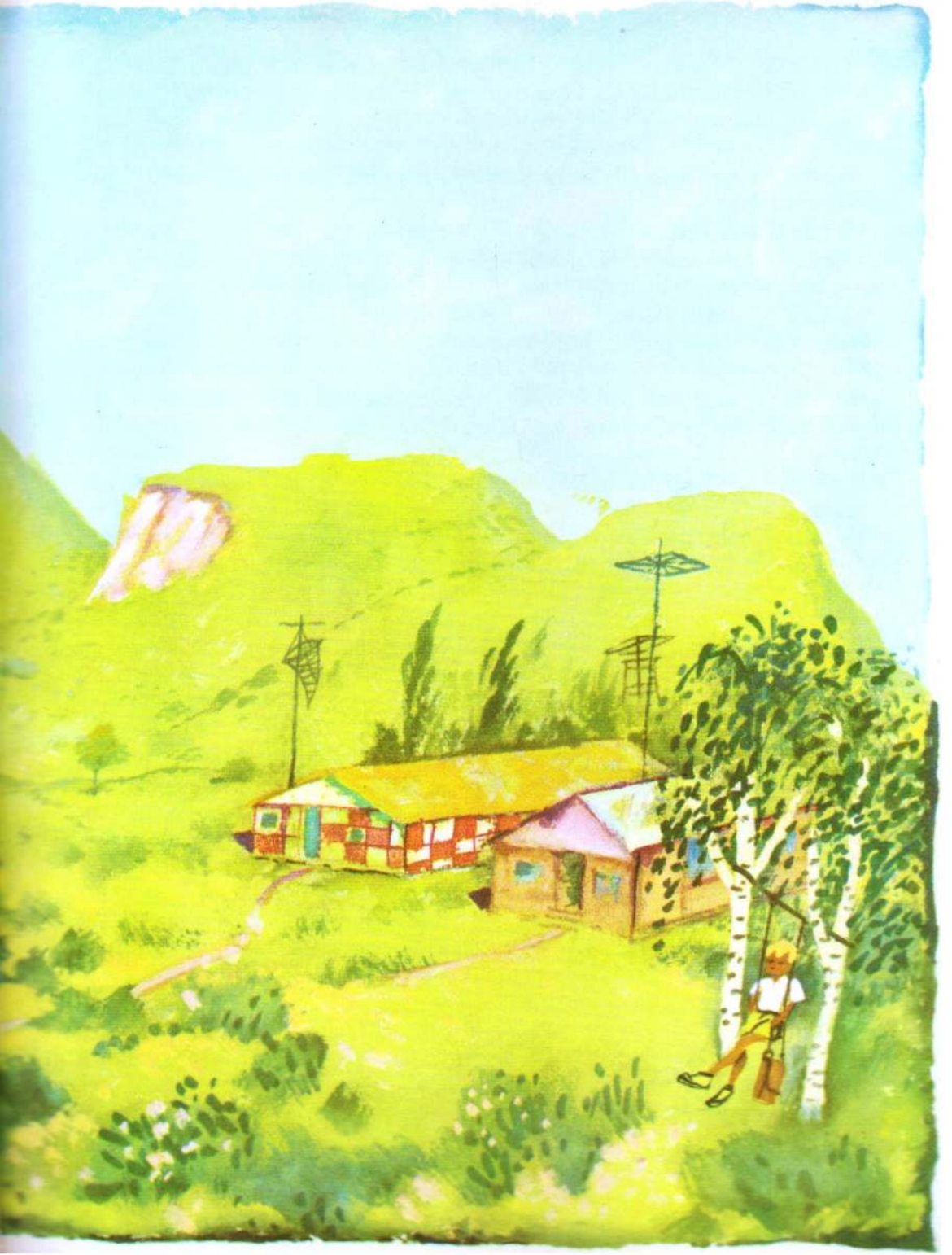
"People who really need to, get here on time and fly on scheduled flights. All our planes leave in the morning."

"I didn't know that. I was told I could fly any time."

"Who told you such nonsense?"

Alex was about to explain that the Captain had told him but then realised that the Controller would not care a straw about what some captain or other had said.





"There're no planes today," repeated the Controller. "None at all."

Alex felt offended and began to get rather angry again.

"None, you say?! Well, I've just seen one. It's standing quite near here."

"Well I never! Seen it, have you? This plane's special, and for special cases only."

"Well, that's just what I am!"

"Really," grinned the Controller sarcastically. "And what have you got to prove it?"

"A ticket," said Alex boldly. "Here it is."

He strode towards the table and put the Green Pass down in front of the Controller.

"Mmm..." said the Controller, scratching his left brow with his pencil and then, opening his eyes wide, he shouted deafeningly, "Masha!"

A girl in a blue forage cap appeared from behind the equipment.

"Sir?"

"Masha," said the Controller sternly, "please go out into the field, find the Pilot for Special Missions and ask him to come and see me."

"Golly!" thought Alex.

"Oh! Right!" said the girl. Her heels clicking against the floor, she headed for the door but then turned round and looked enquiringly at the Controller, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Well, what else can I do?"

The girl went out.

"How amazing!" thought Alex. "So I'm going to be flying with the Pilot for Special Missions!" He expected a tall pilot in a blue uniform with gold stripes and a pair of large gloves in one hand and a helmet and goggles in the other to come into the Controller's office, and say, "I'm ready. Where's my passenger?"

But what if he didn't? What if he refused to take Alex?

Instead a boy came in — the same one Alex had seen on the swing. He was carrying a map-case on a long strap which kept catching on the floor-boards.

The boy stood in the middle of the room and looked at the Controller.

"The Controller'll send him off to look for the Pilot," thought Alex.

But the Controller asked, "Where's Vetrogorsk?"

The boy smiled faintly, looked away and pursed his lips as if he was going to whistle or say "ooh".

"I see," said the Controller. "Is it on the map?"

"On mine it is," the boy replied in a ringing voice.

"I'm asking about ordinary maps," snapped the Controller.

"Nope..."

"How long does it take to fly there?"

The boy kicked his map-case and it began swinging like a pendulum.

"I've no idea," replied the boy in no hurry. "Depends. You know how it is..."

"I don't know anything about all those fancy things of yours altogether, I didn't really want to send you because of all the pranks you've been getting up to."

"But what have I done?" the boy asked innocently and kicked his map-case again.

"Well, who swooped down on that lorry? Perhaps it was me?"

"But why did they steal the dog from those children?!"

"You chased the lorry into a ditch."

"It served them jolly well right."

"You might have caused a serious accident. Do you realise that?"

"But it would have been worse if the children had been left without their dog. Do you realise that?" asked the boy insolently.

The Controller's ears and nose began to flush. The boy kicked his map-case with the toe-cap of his sandal and watched it spinning round and round on the strap.

Alex took a liking to him. He was such a fine, bold lad even though he was so small. But Alex could not understand a word of what was being said between him and the Controller. Only one thing was clear: the boy had done something naughty and had almost caused an accident with some lorry or other and because of it was not being allowed to go somewhere. Perhaps, to a film? Whatever it was, it did not concern Alex. He began wondering where the pilot had got to.

"Stop kicking that bag. It's state property!" snapped the Controller. "And stand up straight when you're addressing the Controller on duty."

"Right!" the boy rapped out and deftly threw the strap over his shoulder, clicked his heels, pulled up his blue shorts, which had poppers on their pockets, and stood to attention.

"That's more like it," muttered the Controller. "You've really got out of hand, you know."

Then the boy said in a quiet but distinct voice, "There's nothing wrong about the way I'm standing. Please use a more respectful tone when you're addressing the Pilot for Special Missions!"

"Gosh!" Alex gasped to himself.

But the Controller's nose and ears went puce. There was a creaking sound as he got up from his chair. Alex thought he was going to roar like a lion but instead he said in an offended bass, "Listen to what you're to do ... please."

"At your service!" said the Pilot for Special Missions.

"You're to ... please ... take a passenger with a Green Pass to Vetrogorsk. And then come straight back... When ... could you ... possibly ... get back here?"

"Hard to say. Just depends."

"Well, you're to come back as soon as possible. Understood?"

"Right. May I go?"

"Yes ... thank you...".

The little pilot turned towards Alex, looked gravely at him and said, "Let's get going. Don't forget your ticket."

They went towards the plane. The pilot walked ahead, knocking daisies' heads off with his case. Alex felt rather uneasy.

The pilot turned round, stopped and asked quietly, "Scared?"

"No, no... I just didn't expect this. I didn't think *you* were the Pilot."

"Don't worry. I've got a good plane. It's as safe as houses."

It was only now that Alex got a good look at his face. It was quite ordinary-looking and even slightly familiar. The pilot had huge serious eyes without a trace of mockery in them. After all, he might have smirked or looked smugly at him and asked, "Got cold feet, eh?" Or put on airs for he was, after all, a pilot. But he wasn't at all snooty.

"Don't be afraid. We'll get there safely, you'll see."

"I'm not afraid," said Alex in a relieved voice. "I was just surprised, that's all."

"How long have you been travelling?"

"One day."

"And you're still feeling surprised?" asked the Pilot, laughing.

"Yes," said Alex and laughed too.

The plane was covered with something silvery. Its tail and wings shone in the sunlight.

"It's a toy," thought Alex. "I could probably pick it up with one hand." However, he no longer felt frightened, or, at least, not really.

Three blue letters — SFC — were painted on the plane's tail.

"They stand for Special Flying Corps and everyone here calls the plane 'Fly' for short. I think it's a silly nickname because it doesn't look a bit like a fly."

"Of course it doesn't," said Alex. "Flies are ugly black things but your plane's beautiful."

"I call it 'Dragonfly'," the Pilot said shyly.

He threw back the transparent hood over the cockpit, and opened the door.

"Get into the back seat and I'll start the engine."

Alex scrambled inside. The plane sunk and bounced gently under him. The plastic-covered seat turned out to be rather hard but he did not mind.

The Pilot went to the plane's nose, jumped up, caught hold of a propeller blade and hung on with his legs dangling in the air. The blade turned slowly and the Pilot strained himself and swung it round. The propeller suddenly jerked and at once almost vanished, turning into an empty circle, studded here and there with sparks of sunlight. The Pilot jumped aside and burst out laughing. The grass under the plane's wings bent and lay flat against the ground. The cabin began shuddering and it became rather noisy inside.

The Pilot came up to the door with the wind from the propeller streaking through his hair, he turned towards the house, raised his arm, climbed into the cockpit, slammed the door, lowered the hood and said gleefully, "Off we go!"

Chapter Eight

After a very short run the plane leapt into the air. The airfield receded into the distance and the houses became tiny.

It took Alex about ten minutes to get used to flying. He had flown before with his mother in a large jet but it had not been such fun. You could hardly see anything and did not even feel you were

flying. It only got rather bumpy over the sea just before landing. Now, however, there was sky and puffy clouds above and green land, dark forests and light meadows below. Stretching out all around was the misty horizon, which seemed much vaster than it looked from the ground.

Sometimes the plane tilted one way and then the other and every now and then began to fall as if sliding down a steep hill. But it was fun and not at all frightening to hear the engine whirring like a sewing-machine and the oncoming wind whistling against the glass.

Alex glanced at the Pilot. His seat was lower than his passenger's and tilted far back. Above the plastic seat Alex could see the back of his head, his shoulders and knees, which were raised high and moved every time he pressed the pedals. The plane was flying due south and the sun was almost directly ahead of them. The Pilot's hair was ablaze with light and his knees shone like hard brown chestnuts.

"I say!" called Alex. "Where did you get so tanned?"

"Here," replied the Pilot and without turning round, raised his hand and tapped the glass hood. "It's fibreglass and unlike window glass lets through all types of rays. And as you can see, I'm flying very close to the sun."

"Do you fly often?"

"Quite often!" said the Pilot loudly.

"You don't mind me chatting to you, do you?" asked Alex. "Perhaps you're not meant to during a flight?"

The Pilot turned his head. He was smiling.

"Go ahead! Only I can't hear very well because of the engine. Come over here, if you like."

There was a narrow gap between the pilot's seat and the wall of the cockpit. Alex squeezed into it and squatted down on his heels.

The horizon swayed ahead and the sun's rays beat down on his forehead. He screwed up his eyes.

"Doesn't the sun bother you?" he asked the Pilot.

"I'm used to it."

And, sure enough, his light grey eyes were calmly staring straight ahead and two tiny suns were shining in them.

"Is it far to Vetrogorsk?"

"We'll be there at dusk."

"Oh... Can't you try and get there earlier? I've got to be in time for the museum. It'll most likely be shut in the evening."

The Pilot shook his head.

"There's no point trying."

"Why?"

"Why, don't you understand? You're in a fairy-tale and fairy-tales have lots of different rules. Planes always land at Vetrogorsk after sunset."

"But what if you're in a supersonic jet?"

"Makes no difference whether you're in a supersonic jet, or on a flying carpet, a balloon or even a rocket... The Pilot won't spot the town unless the sun has set."

Alex was silent for a while, and then plucked up courage and asked the question playing on his mind. "I say... Are you really a pilot? A real pilot? Only please don't feel offended."

"I'm not offended in the least," replied the Pilot gravely. "I would have been if you'd asked that before we took off. But you weren't afraid to fly with me."

"No, and I'm not afraid now either. I'm just curious. Is this a job you do — just like a grown-up pilot?"

"Yes, almost... Well, no, not quite. My flights are different. You see. I'm a Pilot for Special Missions."

"But that's even more important than being an ordinary pilot, isn't it? After all, Special Missions are really hard, aren't they?"

"Not always. They're just special."

"But why were you picked for this work? I mean ... you're not even grown-up yet. After all, it's usually grown-ups who are sent on important missions."

"Grown-ups are no good for this job," sighed the Pilot." You sometimes have to fly into fairy-tales and grown-ups can't make head or tail of them and always muddle something up."

"But surely some grown-ups understand fairy-tales well?"

"Yes. of course, they do but then they can't fly planes."

"You mean, there isn't anyone who can both fly and understand fairy-tales?"

"I don't know... I heard of one but he lived a long time ago. A test pilot who was killed fighting fascists. He crashed into the sea..."

The Pilot fell silent, and so did Alex for he thought that the Pilot was most likely feeling sad and he did not dare ask him any more questions. A bristly bluish forest stretched out below.

"Look," said the Pilot. "That's Enchanted Forest Number Eleven. It's got everything! For one thing at least a dozen Red Riding Hoods. You can't imagine what horrid little girls they are! They reckon that because a fairy-tale was written about them, they can behave just like film stars! They're forever arguing and shrieking at one another and almost coming to blows over the pettiest of things."

"How incredible!.." Alex said in a whisper. "And who else lives there?"

"You see that road? Well, every day at twelve o'clock sharp the Gingerbread Man runs along it. As regular as clockwork... Well, and then he meets the Cat and then the Dog and then the Cow..."

"You mean, the Fox gobbles him up every day?" sadly asked Alex.

"Not likely! Gingerbread men are sharper these days and don't let themselves get eaten up... There're also two goblins, a cave of gnomes and eight talking owls. Two of them can even read and write..."

All of a sudden something glinted in the sunlight on the road below.

"And there goes the Silver Knight!" exclaimed the Pilot joyfully. "Look!"

Alex looked closer and, sure enough, a knight in a pointed helmet and silver armour was trotting along the road on a stallion with a streaming mane. He looked as tiny as a toy horseman. A brightly-coloured little pennant was fluttering at the end of his spear, which seemed no bigger than a straw and his white shield was casting off sun's rays like a tiny mirror.

"His horse went lame one day," said the Pilot. "And I had to fly him to the Blue Kingdom. The knight, I mean, not his horse. Gosh, he was huge and had such a lot of armour! It's a good thing my plane's unbreakable or else we would definitely have crashed."

"Is it really unbreakable?" asked Alex cautiously.

"Of course! You can do anything you like in it! Would you like me to show you?"

"Oh yes!" said Alex very warily.

And the next moment the plane plummeted downwards. The earth and sky began twirling round at a terrifying speed and Alex's heart sank violently.

"Well, this is where my fairy-tale ends," he thought and closing his eyes tight, grit his teeth so as not to scream.

And then all of a sudden they were flying normally again. Alex opened his eyes and saw they were flying very, very low over a yellow

road. Then the Knight flashed by and Alex caught sight of him waving his hand in a chain-mail gauntlet.

The plane began to climb again. Alex's heart was pounding like a drum in a symphony orchestra.

"Phew," he said.

The Pilot looked brightly at him and said, "You were terrific! I thought you'd be scared stiff but you didn't even yell... The Knight screamed 'crikey' twice! He's so heavy, we had to descend quickly, and he started shrieking... But when I asked him how he was going to fight the Dragon when he was even afraid of a plane, he said, 'Oh, the Dragon's quite different. I'm used to him but you won't get me back in a plane for love or money'."

"You mean, he really did fight the Dragon?" asked Alex, his voice still unsteady.

"They've been fighting once a week for a long time now. The Dragon's really old and has only five of his nine heads left. And his eyes on one of them are made of car headlights. He keeps asking to be pensioned off but without success. He's been told he can go to a zoo whenever he likes and that there's a cage with all mod cons ready for him. But he can't have a pension because he's not a person, you see... But, you know, the witch Baba-Yaga wangled a pension because she's disabled, you see. She's got a gammy leg."

"Have you seen her too?" asked Alex with admiration.

"I flew her to town once when she went to arrange to have her hovel fixed up... What a horrible old hag she is. Kept grumbling that I wasn't flying the plane right, and so I said to her, 'This is a plane, you know, grannie, not a broom.' And do you know what she said, 'If I'd got hold of you when my teeth were in good shape I'd have made quick work of you...' How do you like that? And then she went and wrote a letter of complaint to the Controller, saying she'd been spoken to disrespectfully."

"But why's the Controller mad at you? Has it something to do with a fairy-tale?"

"No. If it had, he wouldn't have bothered... In a village near the airfield there were some children who kept a puppy in their yard. One day some people driving by in a lorry spotted the puppy in the street, grabbed it and slung it in the back of the lorry. They wanted to keep it for themselves. Well, the children began yelling and chasing after

it but how could they possibly catch a lorry? Well, it just so happened that I was flying past..."

"Did you catch them up?"

"Why, of course. I swooped down on them from behind, hovered over the back of the lorry, crawled out onto the wing, grabbed the puppy by the scruff of its neck and popped it inside the cabin. But the driver got the fright of his life and drove into a ditch... The Controller didn't want to let me fly after that." The Pilot suddenly smiled rather sadly. "But he had to in the end. Seeing there's nobody else..."

"Tell me..." began Alex hesitantly, "how did you become the Pilot for Special Missions? Or is it a secret?"

"No, not at all. I can tell you if you're interested."

"Of course I am!"

"Only... There's still time. Let's call in at the Antarctica first."

Alex decided not to let anything surprise him any more and merely commented, "It's probably very cold there."

"Not a bit."

They flew on for a short while and then all of a sudden the plane began to descend over a vast green wasteland on the edge of a town. It landed in a patch of weeds.

The Pilot flung the door open and jumped down into the undergrowth. Alex followed suit. His feet had gone rather numb and he began stamping them to get his blood flowing again and then asked in a matter-of-fact manner, "Were you forced to land?"

"No, we've arrived," said the Pilot quietly.

Alex did not understand what he meant. Then he gazed round, blinked and asked hesitantly, "This isn't Antarctica, is it?"

There were burdocks, hemp and wormwood growing all around and there was a bitter smell of wormwood summer air. The outline of a small town could be seen in the greyish-blue mist on the horizon.

It was very quiet. In fact, the silence was so profound that not even the constant chirring of industrious grasshoppers could disturb it. The silence was coming from everywhere and seemed all-absorbing.

The remains of a plank fence and two posts with a sagging gate between them were sticking out of the undergrowth near the plane.

The Pilot went up to a post, leaned towards it and whispered, "Can you hear how quiet it is?"

Alex felt rather scared.

"It's like being on another planet," he said.

"Or in Antarctica before it was discovered."

"But ... all the same this isn't Antarctica," said Alex warily.

Instead of replying, the Pilot gazed into the distance and asked, "See that town?"

"Yes."

"That's Kolokoltsev. We used to live there..."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Come over here."

Alex walked over and the Pilot moved away from the post and four names, which had been carved with a penknife, became visible on the old wood:

ANTON
ARKADY
TIMA
CARROTY.

"Anton — that's me," said the Pilot. "And the others were my friends."

"Were?" asked Alex. "What about now?"

The Pilot raised his serious eyes towards Alex and said, "I'll tell you if you like."

With a feeling of alarm, Alex hurriedly nodded.

Chapter Nine

"We used to play here," said the Pilot. "You can hear how quiet it is. It's just like being on some remote island... This is our country. Just look: if you join the first letters of our names together, you get "Ant... Ar... Ti... Ca...". Of course, it's not real Antarctica. We probably wouldn't even get there on my Dragonfly. But we didn't want to. We were happy here..."

Yes, they were very happy whenever the four of them got together: there was wide-eyed little Anton who usually spoke in a whisper and was best at inventing games; and stocky business-like Arkady who had worked out a way of catching summer stars in the sky: you smeared the top of a balloon with soft toffee and then released it into the sky on

a long length of string. As soon as a star got stuck to it, you could pull it down (mind you, the star sometimes scorched the balloon and burst it but that didn't happen often). Then there was skinny fair-haired Tima who was good at training grasshoppers, and freckled ginger-haired Danilka (nicknamed Carroty) who was a loyal friend and a witty artist. It was he who had drawn on the fence the mischievous bobtails and cunning beast Crocopudra which had then escaped from the planks and started living in the undergrowth.

It was wonderful on this vast wasteland although there was nothing but weeds all around and an old fence...

You only had to will it and the wasteland turned into an unexplored land. In the heart of the forests bobtails, part-hare and part-gnome, frolicked and made merry while Crocopudra, which had a great sense of humour despite its voracious appetite, set traps and organised adventures. And you could discover entire underground towns in the labyrinthine caves whose stone icicles emitted a strange light. And in Green Creek the *Blue Whale* ice-breaker was always standing ready to sail in any direction.

And this was all completely real and not make-believe.

You see, somewhere here on the wasteland (perhaps under the stone house's foundations overgrown with nettles) lived a very old Fairy-Tale. None of the four friends was aware of it. All they did was play games.

The four friends never fell out and only once quarrelled when Tima wanted to turn the malachite grasshoppers living on the wasteland into little fiddlers while Arkady stubbornly insisted they should make a cavalry squadron out of them.

"Who wants their squeaky music!" he objected.

But Tima batted his white eyelashes and said quietly, "But listen, listen... How can you call it squeaky? After all, you can't do without music."

"But you can without horses, can you?" yelled Arkady and began waving his arms about. "How on earth will we catch the Black Knight? How will we fight the kangapaws? On Crocopudra? Maybe astride your fiddlers?"

"Oh, come on, lads!" Danilka suddenly said loudly. He got a piece of chalk out of his pocket and drew four fiery steeds on the part of the fence where Crocopudra used to sit.

"Gosh!" said Arkady.

And they began to examine the horses but then all of a sudden noticed that Anton was not with them. Then they turned round and Arkady exclaimed in surprise, "What's up with you?"

"Has something got into your eye?" Danilka asked anxiously.

"Have you hurt yourself?" Tima asked quietly.

Anton smiled awkwardly and turned his face away.

"Oh, do stop it... I got a fright. I thought you were going to quarrel..."

"Now, just you stop talking nonsense, Anton," said Danilka, his most loyal friend. "How can we possibly quarrel? We've got Antarctica, don't forget."

"I know," said Anton, smiling. "I just wondered..."

It was already late evening. Old Fairy-Tale had gone off to bed and all the magic plants had vanished, leaving behind only ordinary burdocks and hemp. But it was still just as quiet as on a remote island. And in this silence the white horses slipped off the fence and vanished into the dusk. But the boys did not notice because they were sitting with their arms round each other's sunburnt shoulders, and their legs all tangled and their heads so close together that strands of Tima's and Danilka's hair were tickling Anton's cheeks.

And Anton whispered, "Do you know what's the greatest thing in the world? That all of us live together in the same town. What would it be like if we didn't? Awful!"

"Well, we'd..." Arkady began dreamily but then all of a sudden let out a howl and jumped up.

He had a matchbox in his pocket containing a little evening star they had caught with a balloon the day before yesterday. The little star had at last burned a hole in the matchbox and his pocket and had just stung his leg. And that's why he was shrieking!

He jumped up, shook the star out, and it began glowing in the grass.

"Why, the little!.." said Danilka, picking it up and tossing it from one hand to the other like a coal. Then he swung his arm and hurled it into the sky. The star flew far away and disappeared among the other stars which had already emerged in the lilac twilight...

The town's main clock struck resonantly through the silence ten times.

"Oh, it's late," said Arkady anxiously, still rubbing his burnt leg. "Let's get back before we get into hot water at home!"

Holding hands, they ran through the bushes towards the flickering lights.

Not once had they ever quarrelled but then something much worse happened.

"What was it?" asked Alex in alarm.

The Pilot sat down and leaned against the broken gate. Winding a blade of grass round his finger and angrily tugging at it, he looked up at Alex rather guiltily.

"If I'd have known..." he said, "I would never ever have gone off to camp... But, you see, I didn't know things would turn out like this... My parents talked me into it. Dad had to go away on business and Mum was taking her institute exams and they decided to send me to camp to make things easier. I tried to get out of it, of course, but they pleaded with me, saying it was only for three weeks... I did not stick it out for three weeks and came back after two. But I was still too late because they'd already left."

"Who had?"

"Arkady, Tima and Danilka... You see, they'd all moved to other towns."

"All at once?" asked Alex in amazement.

"I didn't think that was possible either," said the Pilot sadly. "All at once, Arkady's dad was sent to work on a construction site in Blue Hills, Tima's parents were invited to a new theatre in Yasnograd — they're actors, you see. And Danilka's mother took him to live in the country."

The little Pilot fell silent and banged his fist against his knees.

"If only I'd known!.."

"But what could you have done?" asked Alex. "Well, you wouldn't have gone away to camp. But the boys would still have been taken away."

Anton shook his head.

"Never! We'd have thought of something. We'd have simply held hands and nobody would have been able to drag us apart. We could do anything when we were together. But this time... It was all my fault..."

Alex thought that the Pilot was going to burst into tears and so he said hurriedly, "Oh, come now! You're not that much to blame."

Anton glanced at him and said thoughtfully, "I know I'm not... Because afterwards I did everything I could."

After losing his friends, Anton realised it was pointless crying although his eyes sometimes smarted of their own accord. Anton missed Danilka, Tima and Arkady terribly but people react to this feeling of loss in different ways. Some simply sit about feeling miserable while others look for ways out. And this is what Anton did.

Blue Hills, Yasnograd and Danilka's village were all a long way from Kolokoltsev. You could not possibly get there on foot, and it would take a very long time by train, too. Anton realised he needed a plane and, of course, not an ordinary one which carried passengers with tickets for you could not very well fly there and back every day on one of them. Besides, there was no airfield near Danilka's village.

He needed a small, light, fast plane of his own which he could land on the wild wasteland which the boys called Antarctica.

Now, a plane isn't like a carrot: you can't grow it on a vegetable plot. And even if you were to save your ice-cream money for the rest of your life, you still wouldn't have enough to buy one in a shop. That's why Anton went to his Dad's cupboard and dragged out some rolled-up drafts.

Anton's Dad, Ivan Topolkov ran an aircraft model group at the Pioneers' Club. He sometimes tried to explain to his small son what ailerons, undercarriages and fuselages were but so far Anton had not taken much interest in planes. Now, however, he had no choice.

He selected the draft of the most attractive model but it was still a model and not a real plane and so he carefully added a naught in black ink to all the figures signifying dimensions. For instance, the wings now spanned ten metres instead of one and the fuselage was six hundred centimetres long instead of sixty. Then he carefully drew see-through hood over the cabin.

It's, of course, awful to deceive, Anton knew that perfectly well but what else could he do? Besides, he considered he had also been deceived when they did not write and tell him about his friends leaving.

Anton's father was away on business and the group was being run by a monitor whose name was Senya Lapochkin and who was seventeen. And so Anton brought the draft to the Pioneers' Club and handed it over to Senya.

"Here... Dad said you're to start building it while he's away."

Senya unrolled the sheet of paper and whistled, "Why, this is a huge plane, not a model. Why make it so big?"

"Don't know..." Anton shrugged his shoulders and blushed. It was horrible lying, especially as he liked Senya. But what could he do? "I don't know exactly... I think Dad said the plane's going to be carried at the front of the column during the sports parade."

"Huh..." said Senya. "What an original venture. Only I don't understand why it's got a real engine."

"Well, probably so that the propeller should turn like a real one."

"It's got a cabin, too. And even two seats..."

"Oh, well..." replied Anton, going even redder, "that's because Dad promised to put me inside it during the parade."

Senya scratched the back of his head and adjusted the glasses on his long nose.

"Well, then... Boys! Have a look at the order we've been given! Will we cope?"

The boys, tall and serious teenagers, gathered round to have a look and said they would.

They built the plane outside in the yard because if they had built it indoors, they would not have been able to get it through a window or door afterwards and the director of the Pioneers' Club would certainly not let them knock down a wall. Anton hovered nearby all the time and watched how the work was progressing and in bed at night dreamed of flying and meeting his friends. Before going to sleep, he would stick his nose into his pillow and whisper, "Good night, Tima, good night, Arkady; good night, Danilka. Don't worry, I'll soon fly over and get you..."

The plane's body and wings were assembled from laths and covered with silver film. Its engine and wheels had been taken from an old motorbike. When the propeller was tested for the first time, a rustling wind raced round the yard and the plane rose slightly on its springy undercarriage.

"I hope it doesn't take off," said Senya and Anton's heart began pounding.

Anton's father came home just before the sports parade. He was very surprised when he caught sight of the silver plane in the yard of the Pioneers' Club. The boys showed him the draft. Anton's naughts were

so neat that his father did not suspect anything and decided that he had muddled up the figures himself. He cursed himself for being so absent-minded but did not get upset. After all, why shouldn't they take their wonderful creation to the parade and surprise the whole town!

Meanwhile Anton was getting terribly nervous at the prospect of flying. Don't imagine he was afraid, though! He was afraid of not getting off the ground. You see, his only chance would be during the parade when the column came out into the square. He could not very well take off from the yard because of all the fences around and wires in the air.

However, on the morning of the parade, Anton grit his teeth and told himself not to be nervous for he realised that if he was, he would spoil everything.

The plane was so light that it was lifted and carried along by only twelve people who were, to be sure, strapping lads from the senior classes.

Anton swayed to and fro in the seat and touched the accelerator. Before they set off, Senya had said to him, "When we get near the square, push the lever but only gently just so that the propeller should start spinning."

Large brightly-coloured flags were fluttering in the wind, shiny trumpets were blaring and drums beating. The square drew nearer all the time.

Anton stepped on the pedals, placed his right palm over the control lever and the left one over the accelerator. He felt frightened for a second, but as soon as he imagined how surprised and happy Arkady and Tima would be and how Danilka would roar with laughter when he arrived in his plane his fear vanished. He lowered the cabin's see-through hood. The houses parted and an empty space stretched out ahead. He pushed the lever slightly.

The propeller jerked and began whirring like a large fan. "Go on," Anton ordered himself and pushed the lever slightly again. The plane began to shudder.

"Hey!" someone shouted below. "Cut it out!"

"Now!" said Anton and pressed it harder.

The plane rushed forwards, cutting off a large bunch of balloons above the column with a tip of its wing and flew low over people's heads. Anton pulled the control lever towards him and the square began quickly and smoothly to recede. He did not hear people shouting,

of course, and only saw them waving their arms. They had most likely decided the flight had been specially arranged for the parade.

"I won't half catch it at home," Anton thought in a flash but instantly put it out of his mind.

A splendid dark-blue sky swept open above. The earth had grown vast and lost its edges in far-off mists. Somewhere to the north beyond the mists lay Blue Hills and Anton turned his plane towards them. He did everything just as he had read in the flying handbooks and the plane was responding and being as meek as a lamb.

"That's it, my little dragonfly..." Anton said to it.

The plane flew over the north edge of Kolokoltsev, and Anton caught sight of his house, his school and the pond where some boys were fishing for perch, and the museum's white tower and the old clock. And beyond the last street stretched the green field of Antarctica.

And then all of a sudden the engine failed.

It grew quieter and quieter and the propeller began turning more slowly as if someone in front of the cockpit was waving his arms and asking for help. The fuel tank had run dry for, you see, nobody had got the plane ready for a long flight and Anton had not thought of this either.

The plane's nose dipped and plunged downwards.

Anton was not afraid or, rather, he was not afraid of crashing but afraid that the plane would be taken away from him and he would never fly to his friends.

He landed his obedient plane on the wasteland with relative ease. The weeds began rustling under its wings and it grew very quiet. He rested his forehead against the cold instrument panel and stayed still for a long time. Then he heard shouts.

People were shouting in alarm as they hurried towards the plane through Antarctica's tall weeds. Among them was Anton's father, the manager of the Pioneers' Club and the head mistress of Anton's school, Vera Severyanovna. A policeman was running ahead of them blowing a whistle.

Anton climbed out of the cockpit, hung his head and waited to be scolded and punished.

"You wicked boy," said his father breathlessly. "You almost gave me a heart attack."

And this was true.

"Oh, everyone knows Topolkov here. He's the worst behaved pupil of Form Three B," declared Vera Severyanovna in a menacing tone.

But this was not true.

The policeman started getting his pad and pen out of his bag and it was all very unpleasant.

Then all of a sudden a tall, stern-looking man in a blue uniform and white peaked cap appeared (Anton never understood how he got there), carefully drew Anton by the elbow towards him and said quietly, "Would you all please be so kind as to calm down and leave the boy alone. He's under Fairy-Tale's protection."

"And then what happened?" asked Alex because the Pilot had fallen silent.

"Then the man took me into a large room containing all sorts of equipment with walls lined with various maps. He sat me down in a chair and asked if I'd like an apple. I thought for a moment and then said I would because, you see, I really did feel like one. And as I was munching it, he said, "We've got a very serious problem, Anton. A little girl's fallen ill and she may even die. She was on her own at home and ate something she shouldn't have but what it was exactly, nobody knows and the doctor can't understand what he should treat her for. We've got to help.'

"I, of course, kept silent because I'm not a doctor, after all. But then he again said, "There was a furry toy monkey with the little girl at the time and it saw everything but, you see, it can't speak. Get what I mean?'

"But I hadn't understood a word. He began explaining that far away in the north-west there was a magic forest and a wizard lived there who could speak to toys. He asked me if I could fly the monkey there so that the wizard could have a word with it."

"Can you?" the man asked Anton and looked him gravely in the eye. "You're not afraid?"

Anton was not afraid of flying and was not very afraid of the wizard either.

"Are there no grown-up pilots?" he simply asked in surprise.

The man grinned and said, "You see, in order to fly to the magic

forest, you've first got to believe that it actually exists. No grown-up pilots believe in fairy-tales."

"Do you think I do?" asked Anton.

"I know you do. Otherwise you and your friends wouldn't have invented your Antarctica."

"All right," agreed Anton. After all, if the little girl did die no fairy-tales would be of any use.

He put the one-eyed toy monkey on the back seat. Some mechanics filled the fuel tank and he set off on his second flight.

"Did you find the wizard?" asked Alex.

"I didn't even need to. The monkey started speaking to me in the plane."

"Really?!"

"Yes. It said the little girl had swallowed two tubes of shaving cream and one of its glass eyes."

"Did she get well?"

"Of course. Only then I had to fly to Black Lake straightaway because a hole had appeared in the mermaids' underwater school and they needed a diver."

"Well, and what are mermaids like?.." asked Alex nervously.

"Just like all little girls — giggly and silly. Even worse than little Red Riding Hoods."

"Did they tickle you?"

"Gosh, if they'd tried! I took a big stick along just in case..."

"And then what happened?" asked Alex.

"Well, the Chief Controller registered me as one of his pilots and said I'd be flying on Special Missions because I already had experience and my plane was very reliable... I was issued a map-case and a uniform but I don't like wearing it because it's made of very coarse prickly cloth and its collar rubs my neck like a grater..."

"Are you pleased you became a pilot?"

Anton shrugged his shoulders and then replied with a smile, "Sometimes I am and sometimes I'm not... Once we were having a maths test and I was really stuck. Then all of a sudden someone called round the door that the headmaster wanted to see me! The Chief Controller had sent a parcel I was to deliver at once. What a stroke of luck it was! Vera Severyanovna was really furious about it though."

"You mean you fly all year round and not just in summer?"

"That's right... But when you fly into a Fairy-Tale, it's almost always summer there. That's why I'm so tanned." The Pilot burst out laughing and jumped up.

"Hang on!" said Alex cautiously. "You've forgotten the most important part! Did you fly to your friends?"

Anton stopped laughing and said, "Yes, I did..."

Chapter Ten

It happened like this.

He flew to Blue Hills and found Arkady.

"Golly! Anton!" Arkady cried, his round face lighting up in a smile. "Have you come for good or are you just visiting?"

"I've come for you," said Anton. "Let's fly to the others. I've got a plane. Yes, a real plane, honest!"

Arkady did not seem very surprised.

"But where did you get it from? Built it at the Pioneers' Club? In our engineering group we make robots, you know. I'll show you, if you like."

"Another time," said Anton. "Arkady... Well, come on, let's fly to Carroty and Tima right away!"

Arkady sighed and said, "You see, I've got an engineering group at two."

"Arkady..." said Anton quietly. "But what about Antarctica?"

Arkady sighed again and glanced at his watch.

"You know what? Fly to Timka first, arrange everything with him and then fly back for me."

"Well, all right..." said Anton.

Timka was playing the violin. The music was coming through the window and you could tell how well he played from a long way off.

He caught sight of Anton in the doorway, lowered his bow and said quietly, "Anton ... is it really you?"

"Do you want to go back to Antarctica?" asked Anton. "I've got a plane. Honest, I have."

Timka looked at him and then at the violin.

"But can I take it with me? Nothing will happen to it on the way, will it?"

"We'll wrap it up and, anyway, I'll fly ever so carefully," said Anton.

And then Tima's famous father came in and said, "Anton, can I have a heart-to-heart talk with you as one man to another?"

"Of course, Uncle Vic," replied Anton.

They went out into the corridor. Uncle Vic nervously adjusted the braces over his round stomach and said, "The thing is... I know what friendship's all about, too. I know all about favourite places and favourite games and so on... But Tima's really got into music and he's doing so well. He's already played in a real concert. He can't play games now because he has to practise every day."

Anton felt like bursting into tears but checking himself, said, "Well in that case..."

"We'll always be happy to see you!" Tima's father called after him.

Anton landed his plane in a meadow behind some vegetable plots, asked a group of boys the way and went straight to Carroty's house.

Carroty was sitting on the porch and moulding a wonderful big crocodile out of clay. Before Anton had time to say anything, he got up and turned round quickly. Then he smiled very slightly but his eyes and even freckles sparkled with joy.

"Well," he said. "I told everyone so. I knew you'd come, I promise I did. Even Mum didn't believe me but I just knew it... How did you get here?"

"By plane... Yes, really! I'm not joking, Carroty. I've a little plane. Let's fly to Antarctica!"

Carroty went on smiling but the shine vanished from his eyes.

"I can't," he said. "I won't be allowed to."

"But it's completely safe!"

"That's not the point. My doctor won't let me. It seems, there's ... well, something's wrong with my heart... That's why we moved into the country. It's quieter here. I'm not even allowed to run, and so I certainly should not fly. If I disobey doctor's orders, I'll have to have an operation. I'm not afraid of that, but Mum's terribly worried."

What could you say to that? If your heart stops, not even a fairy-tale will help you. So trying as hard as he could to smile, Anton said, "Don't you worry. I'll come and see you often..."

And so every now and then he flew to see Carroty, Arkady and Tima and they were all pleased to see him. But in their new homes they made new friends who were always close by, while Anton could not stay with them for long because of his Special Missions.

"...And that's how it's been for a whole year now," he told Alex. "Visiting enchanting forests and magic kingdoms..."

"Well, it's interesting, isn't it?"

"Yes, sometimes it is and sometimes it's even frightening and at others it's fun... But it still makes no difference..."

"What doesn't?"

"Well, you see ... who wants magic countries when you're alone. You get bored all by yourself."

"How can you say you're alone?" objected Alex. "After all, you always carry a passenger."

"Well, what of it? My passenger leaves me as soon as he gets to his destination. Everyone has his own fairy-tale and his own way to go. I fly in other people's fairy-tales but don't seem to have one of my own. It's come to an end."

"Do you really think it has?"

"Of course, it has. Antarctica no longer exists because I couldn't get my friends together... And, you know, the best fairy-tale's about finding a friend."

"That's true," said Alex. "You know what, Pilot? What you need is a co-pilot."

"No, I don't," said the Pilot. "He'd be of no use. I'd need a second seat for him but where would I put my passenger then? Now, if I had someone near me like Carroty ... or Tima. Well, someone who could sit near me or even share the same seat, we'd never feel cramped. What matters most is being together..."

"I understand," said Alex.

And he really did but the sun was already sinking and he had his own fairy-tale and his own way to go. To remind the Pilot of this, he asked cautiously, "Will I be flying back with you?"

"No, you'll go back by train," said the Pilot. "That's the rule. It'll be simpler and easier that way, you'll see... Well, let's be off."

They flew until the sun dipped below the horizon. The sky was still bright, but the earth became plunged in twilight.

The Pilot landed his plane in a large field and Alex jumped out of the cabin. The grass was soft and springy. There was a smell of warm earth, grass juice and, for some reason or other, milk.

A pale yellow sunset gleamed over the tops of the grass in the west and a half moon was floating in a green strip of sky just above the sunset. It was very bright and porous and seemed to smell just like a fresh loaf. And above this loaf-moon the lilac sky was studded with stars.

The Pilot jumped out and stood next to Alex.

"Well, here we are," he said quietly. "Now we've really arrived... Go straight towards the sunset. First you'll walk over some grass and then you'll come to a path and then a road. Keep going until you see the town. It's not far."

"Thank you, Anton," said Alex. For some reason he was feeling rather guilty and did not dare look into Anton's face. However, when he finally did, he saw tiny half moons reflected like gold dots in Anton's eyes.

"Good-bye," he said quietly and took Anton's firm, warm palm between his own.

"Good-bye..." said the Pilot, looking down.

It did not seem right just to go off, and so Alex sighed and asked, "Will you fly back now?"

The Pilot shook his head and replied, "No, I'll sit here till morning."

He moved away from the plane, sat down by its small wheel, and leaned his back against its soft tyre.

"Why?" asked Alex anxiously.

"Well, no reason. Someone may suddenly come along. Some passenger or other."

"But the Controller will lose track of you."

"No, he won't, he's used to me. And I don't like flying alone."

"Anton..." Alex said hesitantly. "You mean, there's no way I can fly back with you?"

"No. You see, we mustn't take risks. Your journey with the Green Pass on this plane is over. If you fly again, we'll get bogged down in all sorts of business and be sent heaven knows where for a week, a month or perhaps even forever. And you haven't the time. You've got your own way to go."

"Yes," said Alex, straightening up. He came to his senses and said in a resolute tone, "I'll go now."

"Of course. It's time you did," said the Pilot.

But Alex still hesitated and asked, "And you don't mind being left here alone? It's night-time after all..."

"Of course not," replied the Pilot. "Nothing will happen to me. I'm under Fairy-Tale's protection."

"Well, that may be so but it's still cold at night," grumbled Alex. "Here, take my jacket. It's warm and tough."

"No, you mustn't! You'll get into trouble at home."

"No, I won't at all, don't worry!"

Alex took his jacket off and threw it to the Pilot who was sitting in a huddle. The jacket completely covered him from shoulder to toe.

"Thanks," said the Pilot. "Well, off you go now. It'll soon be pitch dark."

He stretched his hand out from under the jacket. Alex shook his little hand again, turned and walked across the dark rustling grass. And when he turned round, neither the Pilot nor his plane could be seen over the grass.

Chapter Eleven

Sure enough, after a short while Alex came to a path and then a country lane leading straight towards the sunset where the outlines of black roofs and towers stood out against a yellow strip of sunset.

"If only I could get there before the museum closed," thought Alex.

And then a black cat* crossed his path.

It was a large cat and, unlike others of its kind, it was walking on its hind legs with its front paws behind its back as if deep in thought. Its head was inclined and its tail shaped like a question mark.

Generally speaking, Alex was not at all superstitious, but this time he stopped and spat over his shoulder.

---

* In Russian folklore a black cat crossing your path is supposed to bring bad luck.

The cat stopped, too, and glancing over its shoulder at Alex, said in a sharp shrill voice, "Lord, how sick I am of the lot of you!"

"Who do you mean?" asked Alex taken aback.

"Everyone," said the cat firmly. "Everyone who spits and swears when he sees me."

Alex became totally confused.

"I spat for no particular reason," he muttered. "What's it got to do with you?"

But the cat didn't believe him.

"I wish you were in my skin," he said in an offended tone. "Yes, in this black furry skin of mine. Then you'd find out what it was like..."

The cat suddenly sat down on the roadside, scratched his ear with his hind paw and went on in a calmer tone, "Wherever you go, there are always roads, streets, pavements, paths, alleys and staircases. And there're people everywhere too. Wherever you go, you're bound to cross someone's path. And all of them hiss at you like snakes... It was only in Vetrogorsk that I got some peace and quiet."

"Did you? How come?"

"I spent a whole week there in an empty barrel on the shore. Lovely town it is. Nobody gets on your back. Not even the dogs pester you."

"Why did you leave, then?" asked Alex in surprise.

The cat sighed sadly.

"I couldn't find the right cobbler's there... I want to order some boots but nobody wants to make them because they say they haven't small enough boot-trees... I went to a puppet workshop but they don't make boots there either. Only shoes and slippers of every shape and size. They even make sandals. But what good are they to me? It's boots I need: red ones with tops."

"What do you need boots for?" asked Alex in surprise.

It was now the cat's turn to be surprised.

"Can't you read and write, then?" he asked. "Don't you know the story of Puss in Boots? They've even made a film of it."

"Yes, I know it," replied Alex in a rather offended tone. "But it's not about just any cat. Do you reckon that if you put boots on, you'll automatically become Puss in Boots?"

Alex thought that the cat would get angry, but he thoughtfully scratched his ear again and said, "Well... He was an ordinary cat, too, before he got hold of his boots. He was no better than any other cat. The whole thing is that a cat is noticed when he's walking about in

boots. They give him prestige and help him find his Marquis Carabas."

"You mean, you're looking for a marquis?" asked Alex in a slightly mocking tone.

The cat sighed deeply and gloomily.

"Not necessarily a marquis but, to tell the truth, anyone at all. Just so as not to wander about on my own any more."

"Poor thing," thought Alex. "He's unhappy although he lives in a fairy-tale land and knows how to talk."

As if reading his thoughts, the cat looked at him with doleful green eyes and asked, "Do you need a companion? I know everywhere around here. And we can have wonderful adventures together."

Of course, it would have been fantastic to go back home with a talking cat but Alex suddenly remembered that his mother was away and Auntie Dasha hated cats. But why not introduce the cat to Sofia Alexandrovna?

"No," thought Alex. "He's too independent. He won't get on there with her Kuzya and Roly-Poly."

"The thing is..." he began embarrassedly.

"Yes, I understand," interrupted the cat. "Everyone has worries of his own. I don't mind. It just gets my back up when people start spitting after me. How can I go anywhere? I can't fly through the air, can I?"

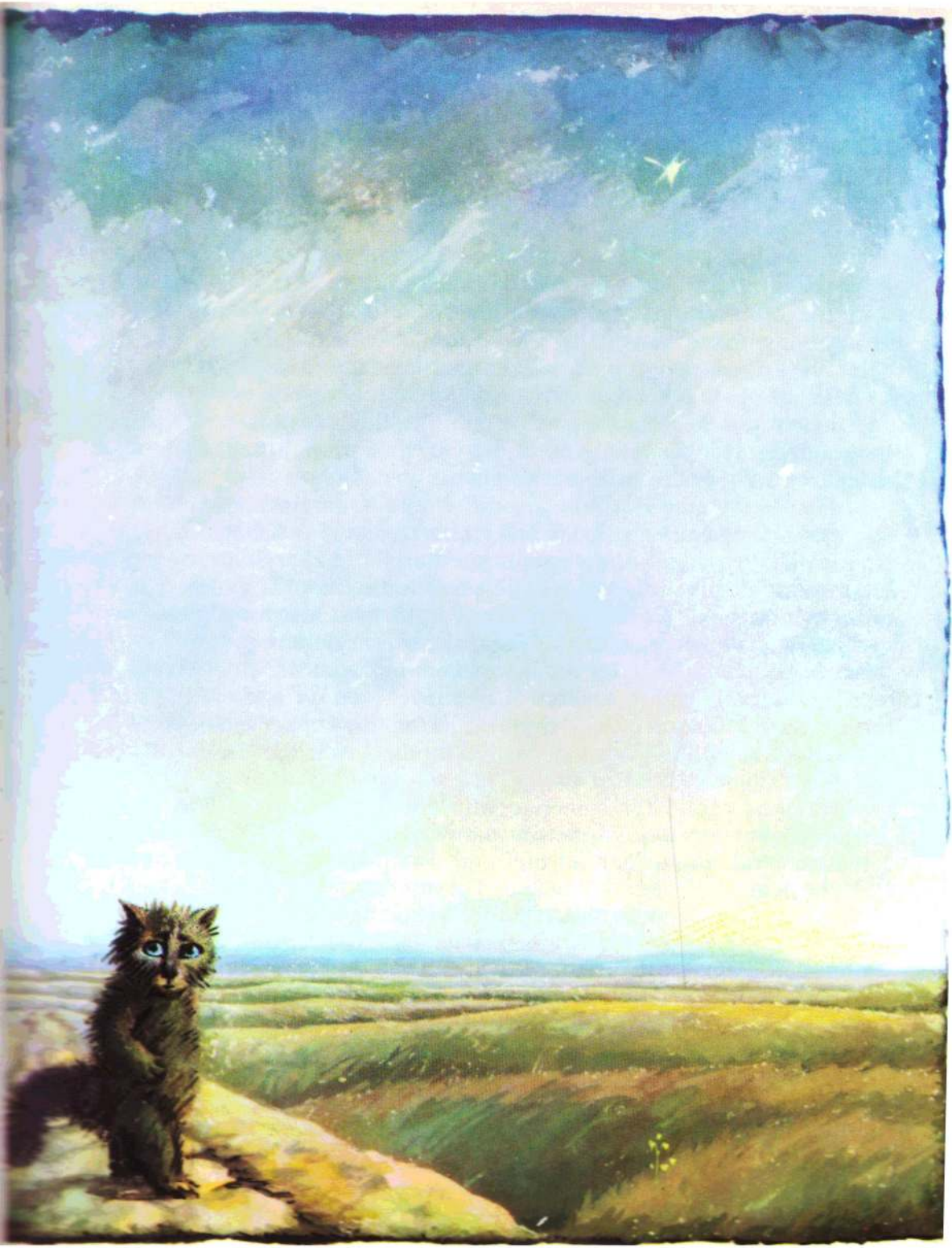
"Through the air?" repeated Alex, cheering up at an idea that suddenly flashed through his mind. "Listen, puss! Just keep going straight and you'll come to a plane in the grass and a boy sitting by it. He's not just a boy, but also a pilot and he gets terribly bored flying by himself. If you tell him you're looking for a companion, he'll be really pleased."

"You think so?" asked the cat and even quivered with excitement. "Will he take me?"

"Yes, I think so. After all, you're small enough not to need a separate seat."

"Of course! I can curl up into a tiny ball! Thanks! I'm off!"

The cat went down on all fours, swished its tail and streaked through the grass like black lightning. The next moment he vanished and only the tops of the grass swayed after him.



Alex looked after it and then began walking towards Vetrogorsk. For a few minutes he felt annoyed with himself as if he had done something wrong. But then he began thinking about the clipper and forgot everything else.

Vetrogorsk began with a small avenue lined with great knotty elms and oaks. You could hardly see the houses in the shadows. The lights from the windows of the small turrets and upper storeys filtered through the leaves onto the cobblestones, which gleamed like the scales of an enormous fish. Night had already descended and the sky was a very dark blue.

It turned out to be a long street running up and down overgrown slopes, under flickering lights and over little hunch-backed bridges beneath which water babbled and frogs croaked.

At last Alex came out into a small round square which was lit up by lamps. In its centre stood a tall white statue of a fisherman tightly gripping the fragment of an oar in one hand and carrying a huge fish like a shark on his shoulder. All the surrounding houses had balconies, galleries and small stairways. A small tram with laughing passengers clanked and vanished into the dark slit of a side-street.

A vaguely familiar salty smell was coming from the side-streets. At regular intervals yellow gleams of light flickered on and off the stone fisherman's sou'wester and light walls of the upper storeys. Alex realised it was the light of a lighthouse and the smell of the sea.

He looked round for someone who could tell him the way to the Ship Museum but there were not many people about. Then he heard some cheerful sounds behind him and was surrounded by a crowd of little boys.

He was startled at first but then realised there was nothing to be afraid of as the boys looked very friendly. A tall, slim, dark-haired boy said to Alex as if he knew him, "Come with us! We're going to look for Steve the talking dolphin because he knows where the old steamer *Vesuvius* sank with all the New-Year's tree decorations on board. We've been told Steve's spending the night in Yellow Bay. Come on! It just so happens we need one more man in our crew."

"Never mind that! You're welcome anyway!" chimed in a round-headed little lad in very long baggy trousers and a striped tee-shirt.

He had large freckles and two teeth missing. "Come on," he repeated. "Steve will give us a ride. He's as fast as a rocket!"

He lisped and so it sounded more like: "Stethe will gith uth a ride. He'th ath fatht ath a rocket!"

The others started laughing but not at all spitefully and then the tall boy spoke up again, "It's such a wonderful evening, we're bound to have some kind of adventure."

Many of the boys were carrying oars and two had a long pole wrapped in tarpaulin on their shoulders. Alex guessed it was a sail.

"No, I can't," he said. "Thanks but I really can't, honest. I've got some important business and hardly any time to spare."

They looked disappointed but not offended, and the little lad in the striped shirt said, "That'th a terrible shame."

Alex asked the boys how to get to the Ship Museum and they explained: "First go down that side-street, then across a large park and through a hole in the hedge and you'll see it straight ahead."

The park was like a magic forest and the path was overgrown with creepers. Bats flitted through the air and green lights were glimmering over the lawns like swarms of butterflies. Alex glimpsed a little yellow latticed window for a moment. Someone was striding after him. Every now and then branches crackled around him. Suddenly two shots rang out and a voice shouted out cheerfully, "Missed, Crooked Shark! Now it's my turn!" Then a little bell tinkled.

Several times Alex was hailed: "Hey, you boy, stop! Do you want to come with us?" But he kept going and said nothing in reply for he felt that if he looked round, he was bound to be distracted from his goal by some adventure or other.

At last he got to the hedge, found the hole and crawled out onto a stone pavement.

He spotted the museum at once. It was an old mansion which looked like a large church except it did not have domes. A real ship's mast with little lights loomed over its façade. Lights were on inside the museum too.

Alex ran across the street and onto its porch.

It had very tall oak doors with wooden carvings of sailing ships and bronze door handles shaped like crossed anchors.

Alex was sure the doors would be locked but still took hold of a bronze anchor and pulled. The door moved heavily and soundlessly and a narrow strip of light fell on the porch.

"They must have forgotten to lock up," thought Alex.

What should he do now? After all, he had not come all this way by ship and plane just to give up at the last moment.

He opened the door wider, slipped inside and found himself in a hall dimly lit by large patterned lanterns, which, he guessed at once, came from old ships. To the right against a wall lay a huge black anchor and a grey puppy was fast asleep by its massive base. Its ear kept twitching but it did not wake up.

To the left a semi-circular staircase led up into the darkness above the lanterns. Sea ropes ran up its sides instead of bannisters. They were almost as thick as Alex and sagged heavily.

A white sculpture was gleaming by the staircase. Alex went up to it and saw it was a plaster-cast of a boy on a grey rock. You could tell he had just scrambled out of the sea for he was kneeling on one knee and holding a bottle he had fished out of the waves. It was a real bottle and through its bumpy greenish glass he could see a little three-masted ship inside.

The boy was staring thoughtfully at the bottle, perhaps trying to guess how the tiny frigate had got inside or, perhaps, on the contrary, wondering how he could get it out without breaking the mysterious old bottle.

"He was hunting after a little ship, too," thought Alex. "Just like me." But the boy did not look like Alex. If anything, he looked more like the little Pilot.

Alex started climbing the staircase. Vast ship flags from every country and age were hanging above it and one gently brushed against his shoulder.

It became lighter further up. The stairway curved round smoothly and led Alex into a high-ceilinged hall whose walls were hung with sombre paintings with white sails gleaming dimly in tarnished gold frames.

And the walls beneath them were lined with brown oak steering-wheels, huge bronze compasses on lacquered stands and piles of ring-buoys marked with Russian and foreign lettering.

In a pier between two narrow latticed windows Alex caught sight of a glass-case containing bottles of all sorts of colours, shapes and sizes with coloured wax in their necks. Lying next to them were semi-decayed crinkled scraps of paper and rags with very faint letters on them. These bottles had evidently been fished out of the sea and

the messages inside them, of course, described shipwrecks and treasures.

Over the glass-case hung a mighty copper bell from a sailing ship with the prominent letters "Azimut" written along its rim.

Then Alex caught sight of a mermaid (and even started with fright) but she turned out to be made of wood. In days of yore she had adorned the prow of a large clipper but was now nestling in a corner of the museum hall between a case of thick books about the sea and a bronze ship's cannon.

All in all it was very fascinating but for the deep silence all around, and Alex almost jumped when he heard a pattering sound behind him.

It was the puppy which had been asleep beside the anchor. It gazed up at Alex and began wagging its comma-like tail. Alex was delighted because two is always company and it was very eerie in the empty museum and, to tell the truth, rather frightening.

He walked into another room where it was not so quiet because ticking sounds were coming from everywhere — some quiet like buzzing insects, others loud like thudding hammers and others still resonant like twanging springs. Some ticked fast and others slowly, and all the sounds were mixed together. There were clocks everywhere — on the walls, in glass-cases and on the window-sills; large clocks from mess-rooms and admirals' quarters; navigators' small chronometers; bronze, china, cast-iron and ivory clocks and clocks shaped like ships, lighthouses, steering-wheels and life-buoys...

Shiny brass telescopes and strange-looking instruments lay between faded yellow maps in glass-cases.

"I wonder where the ship models are?" thought Alex.

He walked round a huge globe girded with bronze rings and found himself in another room. The puppy kept close at his heels.

There were no models here either. The walls were hung with guns and standing and grinning in the corner was a jolly pirate. No, not a real one. He was dressed in a long green jacket, brown boots with tops, and the ends of a brightly-coloured scarf were sticking out from under his tattered cocked hat. Hilts of knives and pistols were jutting out of his belt, as befitted a pirate, and in his hand he was clutching a yataghan which looked like a curved hack-saw.

The pirate's face was, well, very pirate-like, although it was, in fact, grinning.

"I wouldn't like to meet him in a dark street..." thought Alex.

The puppy evidently didn't take a liking to the pirate either for it crouched on its front paws, growled ineffectively and suddenly started barking so loudly that echoes rang out all over the building.

"Be quiet, you daft thing!" ordered Alex in fright.

The puppy stopped yapping and gave him a crafty look.

There was a sound of steps.

"Well," thought Alex, "Now I'm really going to get into trouble."

An inconspicuous door opened in the far corner, and in strode a tall man in a dark blue jacket with naval buttons.

"Well, now he's going to give me an earful..." thought Alex again.

"So we have a visitor!" said the man. "A guest at such a late hour. You obviously like the museum very much?"

"Yes, I do..." replied Alex hesitantly. "Only I haven't had a very good look round yet. I'm here on business."

"Really! Important business?"

"Yes."

"Well, tell me about it."

"So you... you work here, do you?"

"I'm the Museum's Curator."

Chapter Twelve

Why hadn't Alex guessed who he was at once?

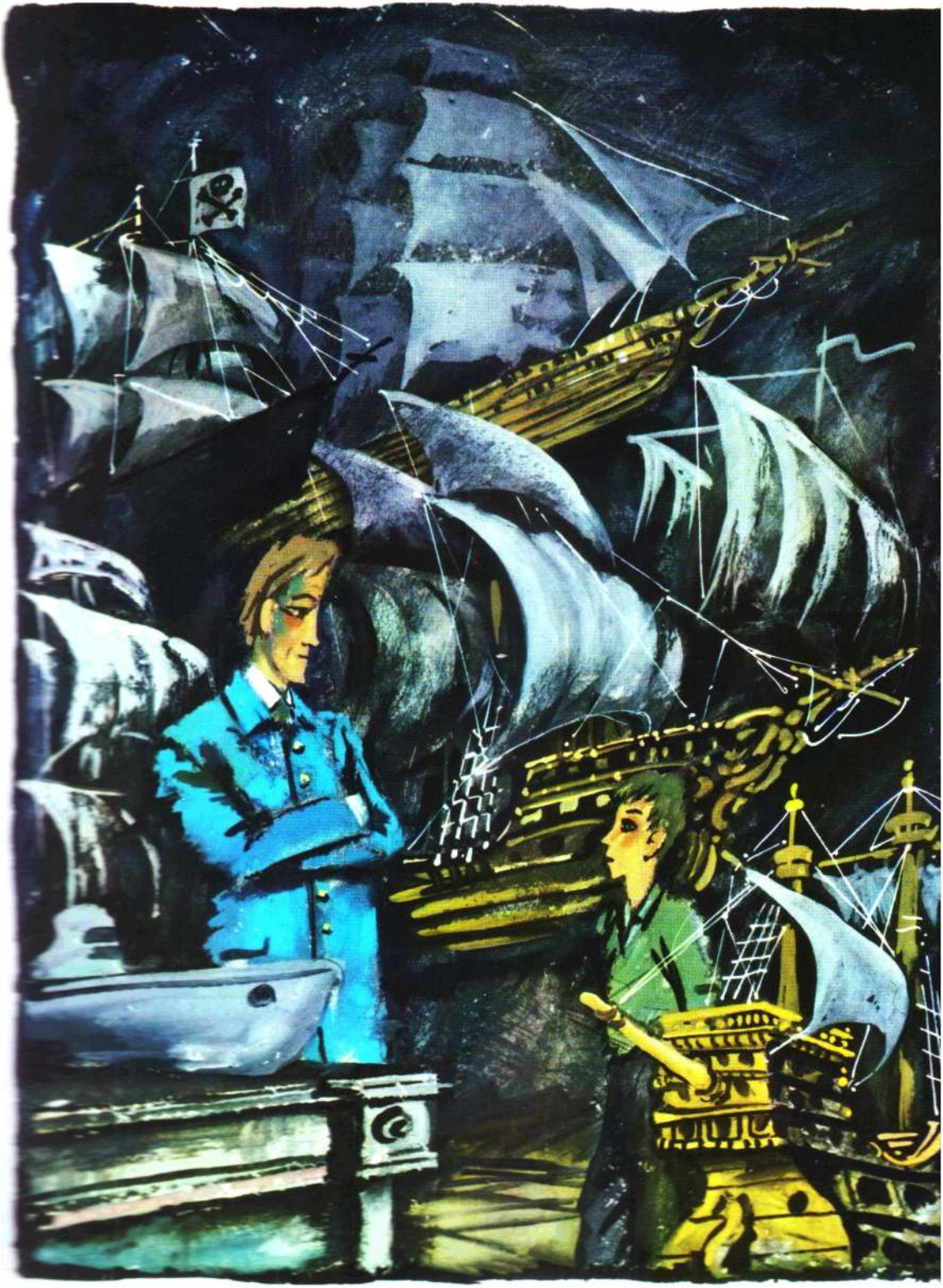
It was because he had imagined the Curator as being old, grey-haired, important-looking and bearded. This man, however, was still quite young, trim and lean, and looked like the P. T. teacher from Alex's school, only slightly taller.

And he had wonderful eyes. Even in the dim light you could see that he had very light eyes like sea-water pierced with the sun's rays. And they did not look at all stern. Alex stopped feeling nervous.

"So you're here on important business, are you?" the Curator asked again.

"Yes... Is it really true that all the models of ships that get lost find their way to you?"

The Curator nodded.



"Yes, it is. But that's only true of the good ones if they've been lovingly made. The bad ones perish on the way."

Alex glanced round and said, "I've looked everywhere but I can't see a single little ship here..."

"No, they're not here. Come with me."

The Curator took Alex's hand and led the way.

Through the small door was a spiral staircase with a bronze railing and resounding iron steps which led down into what seemed like a deep round well. Alex even became dizzy as they walked down it.

At the bottom they came to a semi-circular door. The Curator heaved it open with his shoulder and told him to go in.

Alex found himself in a large underground chamber with mighty pillars and a vaulted ceiling which contained a dazzling treasure trove of ships. His eyes first fell on some huge models of frigates, as large as rowing-boats. Their masts, three metres high, almost touched the large ships' lanterns hanging on chains from the stone vaults. Further away were tables and glass-cases containing smaller models of brigantines, galleons, narrow streamlined cruisers and destroyers. Shiny white liners and trading ships gleamed through the cobweb-like rigging of schooners and caravels. A pencil-length submarine was standing next to a corvette, one and a half metres long. An atomic ice-breaker's mighty body loomed among blue-glass hummocks of ice, and blazing behind it was the winged sail of a Malayan catamaran...

"There must be at least a thousand of them here," said Alex in a whisper. "I never dreamed there could be so many in the world."

"There're many more in the world," replied the Curator. "But here we have the best examples of a miniature fleet."

They walked slowly past the glass-cases, tables and shelves housing models. Their steps and voices were muffled by the porous stone walls.

"Miniature ships have existed as long as real ones have," said the Curator slowly. "After hollowing out the very first boat in the world, man immediately set about making a miniature copy of it. Perhaps he hung it over his hearth to appease the spirits or gave it to his child to play with. Who knows... These tiny boats are now found in ancient caves and burial mounds... Then people built galleys and caravels, and along with the large sailing vessels appeared others, only a hundred times smaller. The same's true of brigs and clippers. And next came steamers, cruisers and atomic ships... The old ships were demolished or wrecked in storms or battles, burned down or were

smashed to pieces against rocks. But their little twins survived... Ignorant folk regard them as toys and nothing but a complete waste of time, but they don't understand anything, my friend...

"These little ships serve a great purpose: they inspire children to dream of far-off islands and azure coves, storms and trade-winds. They sometimes bring a smack of the sea to places which have never felt a sea breeze. When a little boy picks up a model ship, runs his fingers across its shrouds and rocks its light beams, he ceases to be just a boy and becomes a navigator of the future...

"Little ships teach people to be brave. When sailors look at models of old frigates, they become mindful of the valour shown by their forebears in past battles...

"And these models are a joy and consolation to old sailors for they help them recall their past voyages and moments of glory and keep their maritime pride alive in their old hearts...

"That's how it is... And then there's one other thing: models of ships are supposed to be lucky.

"You've no doubt heard of the custom of hanging little ships from the ceilings in seaport taverns. They're meant to remind sailors who've been ashore too long that it's time to be getting back to sea. And they reassure those who are far away from home that a reliable, strong ship will carry them safely back home..."

Alex listened without interrupting. It was all very interesting. He thought about how he could spend a whole year among these ships in the basement without ever getting bored. But he could not stay there a year because it was Masha's birthday the next day. And the little three-masted clipper with a walnut-coloured body interested Alex more than the entire miniature fleet put together.

The Curator fell silent, gazed attentively at Alex and then said, "I'm sorry. I got carried away. Now, why are you here?"

Alex sighed and said hesitantly, "Well, you know, it's a long story..."

The Curator seemed delighted, "Is it? How splendid! Then come in."

He took Alex into a corner which had been partitioned off by some cupboards and made into a separate small room. It had an ordinary-looking lamp standing on an ordinary-looking table, a chair and a narrow leatherette sofa which had most likely been taken from a ship's cabin. Alex noticed an electric stove and an enamel kettle on the table.

The Curator plugged the stove in, put the kettle on, sat down on the sofa and invited Alex to join him.

"Well, go ahead, I'm all ears..."

But Alex did not know how to begin. Even his shoulders began trembling with excitement, and the Curator asked anxiously, "Do you feel cold? It's rather damp in here because the basement's below sea-level and the sea sometimes seeps through the walls here and there. But there's no real harm in that. The sea's moisture only does the ships good. And I've got used to it. But mind you don't catch a chill..."

"Oh no," said Alex.

And he began telling him all about Sofia Alexandrovna and her hats and cats and about the clipper and, finally, about Masha. And when he had finished, he found the Curator staring gravely and even sternly at him.

"You mean, you want to give her the model as a present?" he asked.

Alex nodded.

"That's a good idea.... But, you know, you can only make a gift of something that's yours. Something you've made yourself or, say, bought or earned. But is the clipper really yours?"

"Well... After all, Sofia Alexandrovna did want to give it to me..."

"She wanted to but she didn't..."

"Yes, but as it was swept away by the rain, it doesn't belong to anyone now. And I've come all this way looking for it."

"But you haven't found it."

"Isn't it here?"

"Yes, most likely," said the Curator. "That's the whole point: it's here and not with you. It found its own way here."

Alex kept silent for a while because he was afraid he might start crying in dismay. Then he said quietly, "You've got thousands of models. I only need one. Surely you don't mind giving up one?"

The Curator shrugged his shoulders and said, "To tell the truth, I really do. But that's not the point. Our museum has strict regulations. I can't give a model away if the person can't prove it belongs to him. Can you prove that it's yours by rights?"

"Prove it? How? I've already told you everything... No, wait... there's one other thing."

"What?"

Alex screwed up his eyes with embarrassment and blurted out with

desperate determination, "I've written a poem about the clipper!"

"A poem?" repeated the Curator, drumming his fingers on his knees. "Poems are serious things. Well then, let's hear it."

"I... right..."

It was difficult reciting sitting down and so Alex stood up, leaned against the cupboard, turned his head away and began reciting huskily, "Once upon a time there lived an old ship-wright... Well, that's how it starts. It's called 'Ballad about a Clipper'.

Once upon a time there lived an old ship-wright,
Who smoked a pipe and dreamed of the sea.
And then one day he built a model ship —
Tiny it was but as real as can be.
Just like a frigate, a marvellous sight,
With mizzens and bowsprit, all his labour.
But the tired old ship-wright died one night,
And the ship was left with his neighbour.

Alex paused for breath and then began reciting more calmly:

Well now, she did not treat it badly.
And kept it dust-free and behind glass.
But not once did the old lady dream
Of a creaking helm or a squall's mighty blast.
What did she care for seas, anchors and cannons?
What did she care for the ocean's blue face?..
A hoarse little cuckoo cried on the hour.
And cockroaches ran over the glass-case...

He recalled the peeling wall-paper, tiny windows, and chest of drawers reeking of mothballs in the dark corner and his voice resounded with pity for the little ship:

Surrounded by hats, all old and worn,
Dusty plumes and felt, rotten and faded,
How could the wonder ship not feel forlorn,
The clipper once born of the wind and sea?
What did it see on lonely dark nights,
With its bowsprit turned to the blind window?
Stubborn and desperate, was it waiting for the wind?
Or calling to someone to rescue it?

And the damp south-westerly roared
And the rainstorm lashed and seethed.
Floods tore the small house from its roots,
And at last the little ship was freed.
It sailed away over golden dawns,
Towards bright crimson sunsets inclined,
May the fickle breezes keep it safe
On its dangerous course to far-off climes...

"That's all..." said Alex. "So far. I haven't thought of an ending yet."

The Curator sat in silence for a while and then snapped his fingers and got up slowly.

"Well, Alex... You still don't know how the clipper's story ends. You'll finish the poem off later. We won't argue any more. The clipper's yours."

Confused and delighted, Alex was struck dumb. The Curator strode over to the table and touched the kettle.

"It's warm enough. Let's have supper. Then you can kip down here for the night and go home tomorrow morning."

"But I may be late!"

"Hardly. Come on, show me your ticket... No, friend, you'll never be late with a ticket like this. Sit yourself down."

Alex was very hungry, and ate two buttered ham rolls and drank three cups of sweet tea. Then he felt desperately tired and the only thing that worried him now was the whereabouts of the little ship.

The Curator brought over a camp-bed, set it up and handed Alex a shaggy brown blanket.

"Lie down. I'll be back in a jiffy..." he said and went out.

Alex did as he was told. Through a tiny window high above him he could see two white stars. The air smelt of the sea and damp seashore pebbles and not at all like basements usually smell. He shut his eyes tightly and at once imagined he was lying on some rocks right by the sea.

"And the little ships most likely think they're lying at anchor in a harbour," he thought.

The Curator came back carrying the model clipper and put it down on the table. Alex smiled gratefully.

"Look here," said the Curator, "are you really sure it'll be better off in Masha's keeping than at the museum? Here it's among other ships and feels really at home. Hundreds of boys and sailors come here during the day-time. They'd get a lot of pleasure from looking at it... But are you sure Masha will? Will she love it?"

"Oh yes."

"Are you sure you aren't mistaken?"

"Yes, quite sure."

"Well then, good night..."

Chapter Thirteen

A sunbeam pounced through the little window like a warm, fluffy kitten and woke Alex up.

The Curator was nowhere to be seen. A ship's clock with a bronze rim was ticking away in a corner. Its small hand was pointing to seven.

Alex jumped up.

The clipper was standing on the table next to Alex's Green Pass. "Good luck" had been written in bold red pencil on one of its corners.

"Thanks," said Alex to himself.

Half a loaf of bread was also lying there and a warm kettle was standing on the stove. However, as he did not feel hungry, he took the clipper and walked down up the long sloping corridor and out into the street.

The street, overcast with shadows, was old and so narrow that only a dark-blue crooked slit of sky was visible above, and through it tiny yellow clouds were racing past between pointed triangular roofs.

"That means a wind's up," thought Alex. "But how come the clouds are flying this way and that and heaven knows where?"

There was also a small wind blowing along the street. The clipper's sails filled out, and it lunged ahead as if wanting to take wing but Alex carefully and firmly held onto it.

After striding past some grey and pink houses, winged stone lions, creaking tin signboards and old lamp-posts, he suddenly remembered

he had not asked the Curator the way to the station. He did not worry about it though, so far the road itself had taken him the right way.

The street wound on and on and the houses seemed without end... And then all of a sudden it seemed to Alex that the blue slit of sky had dropped to the ground and split the town in two. It was the sea sparkling at the end of the street.

Alex started, stood still for a moment and then ran towards the dazzling blue sea. The oncoming wind turned the little ship's sails inside out and flattened them against the masts. Alex thought the street was leading him to the shore but when the houses ended, a square with towers on it stretched between him and the sea.

And Alex stopped again. Just imagine this scene: a vast deep blue sky up above, a vast deep blue sea in front of you, a huge square by the sea and towers in the square which looked as if they had been gathered from fairy-tales and sea-adventure stories. They were all very different; some were made of grey blocks, others of orange bricks and even of white marble. Some were imposing and grim like fortresses and others ornamental like palaces, with merlons or pointed roofs, spires and weather-vanes, balconies and patterned windows. And others were simply large lighthouses. A spiral staircase with bronze tubular railings ran from the top to the bottom of one of them and a ship's mast stood on its top landing.

Alex got so carried away looking at them that he even forgot about the sea. Then he walked cautiously across the square, feeling as one who had chanced, like Gulliver, upon a land of slumbering giants. The square was totally silent except for the clattering sound of Alex's steps across the cockle-shell slabs and the pounding sea.

The square was paved with square slabs and growing in the crevices between them were various plants but mostly stiff shrubs with little pink flowers. The towers stood far apart from each other. Tossing back his head, Alex walked round each one in turn, and it seemed to him that they were swaying slightly. The lenses of the lighthouses' beacons were shining overhead, the lacy aerials loomed black and gay-coloured signal flags fluttered in the wind. The clouds raced in different directions, only the pounding sound of the surf grew louder and louder.

Alex saw that he had come very close to the sea.

Large waves were running towards the shore, white manes on blue crests. The shore was low and the square was almost level with the sea. The slabs sloped very gently into the water, and the waves swished against them and raced along them far into the square. Eddy pools whirled by the towers' mighty foundations and the small oak doors in stone niches. Then the water reluctantly receded leaving long strips of vanishing foam. Seaweed stuck in the crevices between the slabs, and marooned crabs scampered backwards after the rapidly retreating water.

Alex walked along the damp cockle-shell slabs and a wave broke over his sandals, soaking his trousers.

"I'd better roll them up," he said to himself but did not attempt to because he would have had to put the clipper down and it might have been swept away by the waves.

Standing closest to the sea was a grey lighthouse tower with a high porch and railings like those on a captain's bridge. A thin suntanned boy in red swimming trunks came out onto the porch, screwed up his eyes against the sun and jumped down onto the slabs from the top step. A wave immediately swept over his legs, up to his knees and then ran back again. The boy burst out laughing and, splashing barefooted across the slabs, came towards where Alex was standing.

He did not notice Alex at first, but as soon as he did, he stopped, became serious and came closer. Glancing first at the little ship and then into Alex's face, he said slowly, "What a beauty..."

And he did not say it with envy but as if asking Alex whether he was delighted to own such a wonderful little ship.

"Yes," replied Alex. "Everyone says that. It's a clipper."

"I know. Granddad promised to make me one but he never has time. But now I'll ask him to get a move on."

Although he only came up to Alex's shoulders, he did not seem small. He was obviously a bold and cheerful little lad.

"And what does your granddad do?" asked Alex. "Is he a sailor?"

"No, he's a scientist. He studies the midnight north-westerly."

"That's good work," said Alex with respect. "And do you both live here in this tower?"

"No, only Granddad does. I just come and visit him and spend the night with him whenever I like. We watch the wind coming together."

He gazed at Alex and the sea was reflected in his eyes (for you see it was very close-by), and then said confidingly, "You know, our wind's completely tame. It whips up storms in other places far away but it's ever so kind and gentle when it reaches us..."

"And what about the other towers? Do scientists live in them as well?"

"Why, of course, and, you see, each of them studies a different wind."

Alex became more and more fascinated and even forgot he should be hurrying to the station. He glanced now at the boy and now at the towers and thought to himself, "So that's why the town's called Vetrogorsk*..." But there were still many things he did not understand.

"But how come..." he began. "Well, the winds are all different. I mean, they come from different directions. Don't they ever collide over the square?"

The boy burst out laughing but not at all derisively. "I guessed straightaway you weren't from here because you don't know things. Winds never collide. You see, the towers aren't all the same height. Each wind has its own altitude, sticks to its own course like a plane during a flight."

He lifted his tanned palms and smoothly passed one over the other, "Like this..."

Then all of a sudden as if he had been jolted, Alex remembered the little Pilot.

But then a wave rolled over their feet again and they ran further back.

"A crab once bit my foot," said the boy, "It was this huge... May I hold your clipper for a second?"

"Yes, do."

The boy took the clipper and rocked it in his hands.

"It's ever so light. It would race along even in a slight breeze."

"Yes," agreed Alex. "Only there isn't any wind at all down here."

"The wind's up there," explained the boy, and they looked up at the sky.

---

* Windtown.

"Now I understand why the winds over your town are blowing in all directions at once," said Alex.

The boy gave the clipper back and, gazing cheerfully into Alex's face, confided, "The lads and I once played a joke... We climbed up the winter trade-wind's tower and raised its aerial to the level of the sirocco's tower. All hell was let loose... The sirocco and the trade-wind flew into one another and started fighting like tigers! The trade-wind's quite even-tempered but the sirocco's terribly vicious... And that really did it! There was a whirlwind over the sea, a thunderstorm over the town, tin sheets flying off the roofs and gates banging... We got a terrible ticking-off from our head-master..."

"It's better not to get on the wrong side of head-masters," said Alex. "They don't give a straw about winds, just as long as everything's as it should be."

"Yes, of course," replied the boy vaguely and glancing hesitantly at Alex, asked, "You know what? If you like... I don't know if you're interested or not... If you like, you can watch our north-westerly arrive tonight. Don't worry, Granddad won't mind, he's kind. Do you know what he's done? He's fixed an old drain-pipe to the window so that when the wind flies in through the window, it goes down the pipe and starts singing at once. It likes it there and sings all sorts of songs it's heard in different countries... Would you like to listen?"

"I'd love to," said Alex. "I really would but I can't. I've got some important business and now I really must get to the station and leave... You don't happen to know how to get to the station?"

"The station?" the boy repeated. "Why, yes, I do. Behind that pointed tower there's a side-street which leads straight to the station."

"Well, then ... bye."

"Bye," the boy said and stood still for a little while, shook his head and then walked down the wet slabs into the sea. When he was waist-deep in water, he turned round and waved to Alex and then dived into the waves and swam towards the white crests.

"Yes," said Alex. "It's a pity but never mind..."

He turned off the square and into the side-street and soon reached the station.

The station was a small and cosy-looking brick building with tin ships on its turrets and a round clock with a picture of a compass on its face.

After finding out from the information desk that his train would be arriving in forty minutes' time, he went out onto the platform to wait.

The sky was now overcast and the poplars were rustling in the station's garden. A stifling off-shore wind was blowing a thunderstorm towards the sea.

There were only a few passengers on the platform. An elderly sailor with gold stripes on his sleeve came up to Alex, glanced first at the clipper and then at him, sighed for some reason or other and asked, "Is it yours?"

Alex nodded.

"It's an old piece of work," said the sailor. "I've dreamed of having a model like that since my childhood."

Alex felt uneasy and somehow guilty. The sailor hung about beside him and then asked embarrassedly, "Look here, lad... Do you really need this frigate?"

"Of course, I do!" exclaimed Alex in surprise.

The sailor sighed again and said, "I know it's ridiculous offering money for a thing like this, but I've got a mahogany steering-wheel from the English privateer *Witch*. And a bronze clock from the mess-room of the sailing corvette *Rurik*. Perhaps you'd swop? Well? Will you? At the Ship Museum they begged and pleaded with me for them..."

"You see, I just can't," said Alex. "The model's not really mine any more. It's a present for someone."

"Is it? What a pity."

The sailor stood there for a moment and then walked away.

The thunderstorm was getting very close. Lightning began to flash and rolls of thunder rang out beyond the trees. Dusty, spiral whirlwinds tore onto the platform and swept along the tracks.

Alex had an uneasy feeling that he had forgotten something important and that something dreadful might happen if he did not remember.

But that was it? After all, everything was going according to plan. He had the clipper in his hands and his train would soon be drawing in. So why was he feeling alarmed?

The wind was spinning the little tin ships round on the station's turrets. Alex looked at these turrets and recalled the large towers in

the square by the sea, and the tower of the midnight north-westerly and the tanned little boy who had invited him to watch the wind arrive... But the boy had swum out to sea, hadn't he!

And the wind was off-shore! What if the boy hadn't managed to get back in time? Would he be able to swim ashore against the wind and waves?

Everyone has an inner self offering comforting advice in times of trouble. This inner self at once began whispering to Alex, "Why do you think he didn't make it? Why have you decided he won't swim ashore? He's a splendid swimmer. Anyway, how can you help? You hardly managed to swim across that stream back at home..."

These thoughts held Alex back for several seconds. Then he dashed over to the elderly sailor and held the clipper out to him.

"Please hold it for a while! I'll be back very soon!" he cried and ran off.

The wind pushed him forward slightly and large drops of rain lashed his back like whips. He reached the end of the side-street and ran into the square.

White horses were galloping across the grey sea. He raced past one tower after another and at last came to the granite lighthouse tower where the old scientist was studying the midnight north-westerly. Now he simply had to beat against the door, call to the old man and tell him about the boy. Perhaps there was a boat or launch nearby?

Alex flew up onto high porch... Standing by the bronze railings were a shaggy grey-haired old man and the boy he had met.

The boy, wrapped in a large naval jacket, was cheerfully saying something to his grandfather. Alex stopped and began panting so loudly with relief and joy that they noticed him at once.

"Have you come to visit us?" the boy asked joyfully.

"Just for a minute," said Alex. "I've just dropped by on my way."

"Oh, I can see that," said the shaggy old man with a kind smile. He had obviously seen through him...

It was awkward just standing there and saying nothing but it would not be right to dash off straightaway either. So Alex said, "I wanted to find out if you had a radio in your tower because I need to contact someone."

"Ay, there's a transmitter," replied the old man. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

"Well, can you contact a plane?" asked Alex, thinking to himself how good it would be to find out if the cat had actually found Anton.

"What plane?" enquired the old man.

"There's a Pilot for Special Missions..."

"Yes, I know," said the old man. "But Captain Topolkov doesn't have a radio aboard his plane."

"How's that? What if he needs to relay something important?"

"People say the lad's like a radio himself. His heart tells him where he's needed and off he flies there."

"I see," said Alex. "Good-bye. It's time I was off."

The wind had died down. The thunderstorm had passed over the town and rolled out to sea. Every now and then dark drops of rain dashed against the stone slabs like disintegrating stars. In a crevice between the slabs Alex spotted a small round shell, which was grey and bumpy outside and pink inside. He slipped it into his pocket and ran to the station.

"Well, mate, you've had me on tenterhooks for the past five minutes. The train was due in any second but you still weren't here. What would I have done with your ship?"

"Thank you," said Alex, gasping for breath. "You see, I had something very important to attend to."

The train drew in and Alex climbed into a carriage and settled down by the window. Bushes flashed past and the sea gleamed behind the houses for the last time.

"Well, this is where my fairy-tale ends," Alex said to himself. "How strange it's been — without any dangers or obstacles. Everything's gone so smoothly. Surely that's not possible?" This thought alarmed him for a moment but the train's smooth motion soon lulled him to sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

When Alex awoke, familiar streets around the station, a pump-house and a bridge were flashing by the windows. And three minutes later the train drew into the station.

The station clock showed two-forty.

"I'll get to Masha's in time," he thought. "I've no time to drop by home though."

There had been a short shower not long ago. The sky had already cleared and the sun was burning hot but the puddles had not yet dried up. Alex looked in one and caught sight of his reflection.

Auntie Dasha was bound to exclaim, "Lord, what a sight! You look like a street-urchin." His shirt was crinkled, and its collar button was missing: his trousers looked as if a crocodile had chewed them and their bottoms were stained with sea salt.

"Oh, well, never mind," Alex thought to himself. To make up for it in his hands he had a streamlined shiny clipper with gay white sails, which was the best present for a girl like Masha, who almost certainly dreamed of becoming a captain. And he was bringing her this present after a wonderful long journey. And when travellers come home, they can't be expected to look like young violinists in white shirts and bow-ties.

He sloshed through the sunny puddles towards Masha's house, feeling in the best of moods, and ran up the staircase to Masha's door.

From the other side of the door came the sound of voices and a scraping violin.

"Am I late? Oh well, a few minutes do not matter..." he thought.

He did not want to give the clipper to Masha straightaway in front of everybody. He wanted them to be alone. He would then hand her the little ship and she would slowly take it from him and quietly say, "Oh, Alex... Oh, how wonderful. Thank you."

He glanced round and caught sight of a cupboard in the wall containing a fire tap. He tugged at the door and it opened. He carefully put the model into the cupboard (it only just fitted), shut the door and rang the bell.

Masha opened it at once. Beaming happily, she was dressed in a sort of shiny dress with red beads like cranberries. "Oh, Alex!" she exclaimed joyfully, and then added in surprise, "Oh, you look so... messy..."

"Hello," he said. "If only you knew where I'd been! I've brought you an incredible present!"

"Thank you!.. Well, come on in."

"Wait."

He wanted to go back for the little ship but over Masha's shoulder caught sight of her guests — two girls with large bows and a fat boy in a check jacket (holding a violin) and — guess who else?— the lanky prince!

And Masha realised he had spotted him and decided that was why he had said, "Wait."

"Oh, Alex," she began saying. "Don't get upset. I decided to invite him because we are, after all, acting in the same play."

"Why not?" said Alex in a whisper.

"If you ask me, you're wrong to be angry with him. He's not bad at all. I think you ought to make it up."

"I'm not a bit angry with him. No, not a bit," said Alex casually, and he was telling the truth because during the last few days he had not given the prince a single thought.

"Well then, come in. What's wrong?"

Alex grinned and asked, "How can I, looking like this? You're all so ... grand. And I'm a real mess."

"Well, so what?.." Masha glanced hesitantly at her guests. "You mean, you've only just got back? You know what? You could run home and tidy yourself up. We'll wait. All right?"

"She hasn't even asked where I've been" thought Alex and began feeling not exactly sad but rather bored.

"All right," he said. "I'll go now."

"Wait..."

"Perhaps she's going to ask me?" he said to himself, cheering up at the thought.

"What's the present you've brought? Don't think I'm greedy. You mentioned it yourself, you see, and you've made me curious."

Alex simply could not bring himself to give her the clipper now so he brought the shell out of his pocket.

"Here. I found it on a sea-shore a long way from here. You can always hear the sea in it."

"Oh, isn't it wonderful! Daddy's got one, only smaller. He keeps it on his writing-desk and sticks his cigarette butts into it."

"But I hope you won't stick cigarette butts into this one, will you?"

"Oh really! Do you think I smoke? I've never even tried. And when I grow up, I won't either although it's considered the in-thing for girls to smoke."

"What on earth is the matter?" wondered Alex. "Only five minutes ago everything seemed so wonderful..."

"Masha..."

"What?"

"Listen. There's such a wonderful sea-shore there... And such huge stone slabs going down into the sea. And crabs crawling across them and shells lying in the seaweed. And towers right by the sea..."

"Where do you mean? Sochi? Mummy and Daddy are taking me there this year."

"No, not Sochi... Have you ever heard what the sea sounds like in a shell? Well, say, in the one your Dad's got?"

"I wanted to but Daddy didn't let me. He said it simply echoes any sound around, and as for the sea, it's just a fairy-tale."

"What does your Dad know about fairy-tales!" thought Alex and said aloud, "I'll go now."

"But you will come back?"

"I'll try to."

"No, promise you will."

"Well, I give you my word, I will ... if nothing happens."

He went down one flight of stairs, waited until Masha had shut the door, tiptoed back up again, took the clipper out of the cupboard, and set off home.

"Lord, what a sight!" said Auntie Dasha as she opened the door for him. "What a mess you look! What have you been up to at your friend's house?"

"We messed around, climbed trees, and played football and slept in the hayloft."

"My word! Can't you look more or less respectable?"

"I will again soon," promised Alex and went off to change.

"I'll heat your dinner up," Auntie Dasha called after him.

"Don't worry. I'm going out to a birthday party. There'll be plenty of buns and cakes to eat there."

Alex stood the model on his window-sill and got out his sailor suit. He no longer cared whether it was suitable to wear to a party. The anchors and blue collar reminded him of the winds above the towers and the shimmering sea and that was what mattered most.

His suit was crumpled (for he had been wearing it when he climbed up the poplar to rescue Kuzya). So he had to give it a good ironing. Then he got some yellow thread from Auntie Dasha and firmly sewed back on his sleeve the anchor, which had been partly torn off. He went about it slowly and rather absent-mindedly as he was thinking to himself, "But she's still beautiful and kind. It's not her fault either. She didn't see the stadium and the horses that spoke, or the rustling grass, or the steamer with silver stars on its funnel. She hasn't been to Vetrogorsk or looked at the clouds over the towers. She hasn't heard about the little Pilot and his Antarctica... She doesn't know what the journey was all about."

And so he began thinking about his journey and the road he had covered for the first time.

...And at that very moment he heard the Voice of the Road calling very softly. What was it like?

Perhaps you could say it was like the very gentle twang of a guitar string which someone was strumming slowly, trying to recall a song. And it was a sad song for the journey was over. But there was also a note of alarm in it. How could that be if, after all, it was already over.

However, as long as the strumming remains muted, this note of alarm does, too. And anyone hearing the Voice of the Road for the first time has yet to discover that the strumming may well break off, and trumpets may sound on the horizon...

Alex pulled on his trousers and shirt, which were warm after being ironed and smelt slightly singed.

He took the three kopecks, his penknife, a crumpled handkerchief and everything else out of his old trousers and stuffed them into his sailor suit's pockets to make sure he never again got caught out as had happened in the travel agency. Then he picked up his Green Pass.

It was already worn and its corners puckered and tatty but it could still be used for travelling. Yes, it was valid (Alex glanced at his alarm-clock) for another eleven whole minutes until four o'clock!

And then a desperate idea flashed through Alex's mind: what if he ran over to Masha's, grabbed her by the hand, dragged her into the street and rushed over to the river with her!

If they ran really fast, they might get there before four and then the steamer was bound to turn up!

And on the way he would explain to Masha all about the forests full of fairy-tales and the town which had adventures round every corner and about the Pilot who knew the way to magic lands...

But would Masha come? As if in a waking dream, he seemed to hear Masha say, "Oh, Alex! I can't. I've got guests."

"Never mind them. They'll eat the cake without you."

"No, I can't! After all, it was me who invited them. It's just not done."

"But it'll soon be too late!"

"I still can't. I've got music and swimming tomorrow."

Somewhere in a neighbouring flat he heard radio pips marking four o'clock. His alarm-clock was eight minutes slow.

He no longer felt like going to the party and as soon as he was outside, he began arguing with himself: "Well, why should I go? They'll manage perfectly well without me."

"But you promised."

"I said I would if nothing happened."

"But what's happened?"

At this point he realised that something really had happened.

It was nothing special: simply a breeze was blowing, and filling out the clipper's sails and flapping his sailor collar. He remembered how two mornings ago (was it really only the day before yesterday and not a whole year ago?) he had come out of his house and the wind had been blowing too. Only it had been blowing jauntily for it betokened a journey although Alex had not known that yet. Now, however, it was pulling the little ship along and not Alex. And the little ship's sails filled out and it was straining to break free and sail somewhere far away but certainly not to Masha's house.

So far Alex had believed he should still give it to Masha, but now he began wondering where she would keep it.

He imagined her putting it on a shelf next to an aquarium containing lazy round-bellied fish which had been born in a glass bowl and had never even seen a small pond, let alone the sea. He also imagined her putting it on the table next to the shell stuffed with cigarette butts.

What would life be like there for the valiant little clipper which knew all about the winds and wide open world? "Oh Masha, Masha...", Alex whispered, and set off down the road. He now knew where he was going.

Sofia Alexandrovna's house had grown even more lop-sided since he had last seen it. One of its corners was hanging right over the gully. Its windows had been completely boarded up and a dried-up ditch still ran down into the gully from the churned up earth around the house.

Alex began climbing down to the stream along this dried-up ditch. Thistles clutched at his elbows, brambles bit him viciously and sharp pieces of clay got stuck in his sandals but he held the little ship over his head and raced downhill without stopping like a stone rolling downhill. At last he reached the bank, knelt down in the water and pushed the little ship out towards the middle of the stream.

"Sail away. You know which way to go."

The clipper trembled and then floated along the babbling stream past a blackcurrant bush on a bend and then its sails were filled by the wind.

Alex rose and sat down on a snag lying by the water. He was feeling better because he had at least put one of his mistakes right.

But what could he do about the others? After all, he had made so many blunders during the journey. Wonderful adventures had been waiting for him at every crossroads, on every path and in every side-street of Vetrogorsk. And everyone he had met (even the cat!) had promised him adventures. And the old man in the booth had told him not to try and avoid them because they were all part of the fairy-tale but he had passed by without heeding the Voice of the Road.

And now this Voice was giving him no peace. But what could he do?

"It's not my fault," he said to himself. "After all, I didn't know I'd chosen the wrong road."

"Oh yes, it is."

"Why?"

"Don't you know?"

"No!"

"Then why's your conscience bothering you?"

"I don't know... I made a mistake but nobody got hurt because of it. Only me. Well, and the little ship but I've let it go."

"What's the ship got to do with it..."

"Well, then I just don't understand."

"That's a lie!"

"No, it isn't!"

"But what about the Pilot?"

Indeed, Alex, what about the Pilot? It makes you go cold inside merely to remember him sitting by the wheel, wrapped in your jacket, and gazing after you. He badly needed a companion and a friend. You realised that but kept repeating that you had your own way to go.

But no matter where you have to go and how important the task at hand is, you must never pass someone by who needs a friend. But you...

"But I sent him a stray cat instead," thought Alex bitterly and angrily thumped his knee with his fist. His knee was damp and his fist rebounded and hit the snag. Little red drops appeared on the scratch and Alex recalled the beads he had seen on Masha's dress a short while ago and thought, "They're probably still waiting for me to turn up. Oh well, let them. Or perhaps she thinks I'm upset because of the prince?"

But, after all, even if there had been no prince, and even if Masha had given Alex a hero's welcome, and even if she had listened in wonder and delight to his story about his journey, and even if she had picked up the little ship as if it were a most precious treasure, would he really have been able to say to himself that everything was fine? For in his heart of hearts he would still have been thinking about the little Pilot.

So what *had* happened? Was it that Alex had chosen the wrong road back in the field near Vetrogorsk? The Pilot needed a friend. And Alex needed one, too, and namely a bold, cheerful and kind one like Anton the little Pilot.

Alex stood up and said to himself, "I'm going..."

"Where?"

"I'm going to wade downstream after the little ship. Since it's sailed away, it means it's started its journey to Vetrogorsk. So I'll follow it and see the Curator and ask him how I can find the Pilot."

Alex stepped into the water with his sandals on and waded downstream. However, his feet soon started sticking in the silt and then a wire caught one of his sandals and tore its sole off.

He clambered out of the water and began scrambling along the bank, but the brambles and briars were so entangled that even the sky completely disappeared from sight. And only round-bellied bumble-bees buzzed in the stifling air and slimy frogs croaked underfoot. Alex forced his way to the top of the gully and walked along its edge but further on the path was blocked by a crooked grey fence. Alex climbed over it and then came upon some other fences with potato patches, heaps of broken glass and barbed wire.

And when he came out into a side-street, he no longer had any idea where the gully or the stream was or where he should go next.

"Things were quite different when I had a Green Pass," he thought. "Every way was open to me then but now every fence is like a mountain in my way."

But, then, there had to be more than one Green Pass in the world! Why hadn't that occurred to him before? The pass was issued to people on Very Important Business! And wasn't that what Alex had now? Yes, it was much more important than finding the little ship for Masha! He was now searching for a friend and, as the Pilot had said, the best ending to a fairy-tale is when you find a friend. And as Alex had still to find the Pilot, it meant his fairy-tale was not yet over.

"I'll ask the old man's advice in the information office", he resolved and, flicking his torn-off sole, raced off towards the side-street where he had already been.

The shoe repairs' booth was open but sitting there was a rosy-cheeked fellow, tapping a hammer and whistling.

"But where's the old man?" asked Alex breathlessly. "The one who used to work here."

"Hello! The old man? Oh, he's retired."

"Retired?" repeated Alex inanely.

"Yep. Why, did you know him?"

"Yes..." replied Alex quietly.

"Well, never mind. I'll do just as good a job for you as the old man."

Before Alex could open his mouth, the lad had pulled his sandal off his foot, and put the sole back on.

"There you are!"

"Thanks," said Alex in a whisper and walked off.

However, he decided that he still had one chance left: he could run over to the travel agency and explain everything to the cashier there and she would most likely be sympathetic and issue him a new Green Pass.

And so off he ran again.

He crawled through the hole into the stadium.

"If I don't get a ticket, I'll come back here and ask the horses," he thought. "They can take me to that airfield. After all, they know all the magic routes."

But there was no sign of any horses. Some carpenters were mending the benches and staircases on the stands.

"You've got no business being here..." one of them called to Alex.

Alex crossed the field without turning round, came out into Polar Captains' Street and walked towards the agency. It was shut. Its blue signboard had been taken down and stood upright against the wall and "Closed For Repairs" was written in chalk on its locked doors.

So that was that. What else could he do?

Go home?

Go back to Masha's birthday party?

Sit down right there and burst into tears?

He turned round and walked away.

After going down some winding side-streets and passing an old church and a new cinema, he came out into Faraway Street.

And everything there was just the same as before. First he passed by the wooden houses lining the street and then came to the plank footpath along the overgrown ditches. The grasshoppers were still chirring and bright yellow dandelions were still growing in the ditch. And broken bits of glass were still glinting in the sunlight. So he should have been feeling blissfully happy as he walked along, but, you see, he knew that he was going to no purpose: the steamer would not turn up.

And he would not manage to get to the airfield on his own. But he kept going all the same because deep inside the Voice of the Road was

asking anxiously over and over again, "Do you remember? Do you remember?.."

So there was nothing left for him to do but keep going and to remember things and, anyway, even this was better than simply sitting at home.

The pavement came to an end and the path ran on ahead. The grass began rustling at his feet and he again felt as if he was swimming across a green sea. And the sky with its little clouds was swaying overhead. The path went on and on. Last time it had seemed much shorter, but now he had been walking for over an hour and the river was still nowhere in sight.

"What's happened?" he wondered. "The old man's retired. The travel agency's been closed for repairs but where's the river got to? It couldn't have gone underground."

He was longing to get to the river and hunt for the steamer's tracks along its banks and stand on the spot where the gangway had been lowered and recall exactly how everything had happened. You see, you always feel better when you remember something pleasant. And, besides, Alex still had a tiny glimmer of hope left. The steamer just might turn up, after all, for all sorts of wonderful things can happen in fairy-tales.

He walked on for at least another hour and could now only just make out the town on the horizon behind him. The grass was swaying all around but there was still no sign of the river.

"No, I'll never make it," he realised and felt so miserable that he could not walk a step further. He stopped and (to tell you the truth) almost burst into tears. I say "almost" because the tears welled up in his eyes and hung on his lashes and silver spots of sunlight flared up in them. Alex blinked angrily to shake them off and they vanished. All except one — a brilliant little star which soared up and began sparkling in the bright-blue sky.

Alex blinked again and again but the white spark blazed even more brightly high above. Then all of a sudden he heard a quiet but distinct whirring noise breaking through the silence, chirring grasshoppers and rustling grass.

Alex's heart leapt. He ran towards the spark, stopped for a moment and then ran on again. The silver spark was getting bigger and bigger and growing delicate dragonfly wings.

"The Pilot..." Alex whispered joyfully. "Why, it's the Pilot!"

He could see the plane getting bigger and bigger as it came straight towards him.

"What a good thing it is I put my sailor suit on," he thought. "The Pilot would never have spotted me in the grass in my green shirt!"

And then Alex became frightened for it suddenly occurred to him that the Pilot might not recognise him in his ironed suit!

So he rushed towards the plane, found a place where the grass was slightly shorter, fell flat on his back and stretched out his arms in a letter "T".

Blades of grass were fluttering over his face and the sun was dazzling his eyes, but even so through grass and rays of sunlight he caught sight of a large slender-winged bird swooping down straight towards him from a great height: it was the plane belonging to the little Pilot, Anton Topolkov.

The Magic Carpet

To my little
drummer Pavlik

I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night feeling tremendously happy and then lie there staring at the ceiling, trying to remember why.

Why of course! Only a moment ago Vitalka was laughing here beside me. No, not that tall thin man by the name of Vitaly Andreyevich who recently came to stay: I mean the real Vitalka — a young lad in a blue tee-shirt with shaggy fair hair, peeling sunburnt shoulders and scratched bony elbows.

Yes, only a moment ago we were flying over familiar streets together with our legs dangling from the carpet. The warm wind seemed to be beating its soft furry wings against our legs and the morning sun was warming our backs.

Drifting past down below were dark green clumps of poplars, brown iron roofs and the silver dome of the town circus. Rising out of the scanty yellow clouds and heading towards us was the white belfry, which looked like a fortress tower, and looming in its top windows were bells which had withstood the passage of time. Its convex roof was made of rusty iron squares, some of which had come off and were sticking up as if the roof had been ruffled by the wind.

Vitalka and I sat with our arms round each other's shoulders and laughed. How funny that ruffled roof looked! How funny those small toy-like barges and launches were on the river below! How funny one of Vitalka's old canvas shoes had dropped off his foot! It was worn down at the heel and had developed a little hole in the part covering his big toe, so we did not bother chasing it. After landing on the circus dome and swishing downwards like a toboggan down a slope, it jumped off the cornice as off a ski-jump and somersaulted into the dense poplars.

"Kick the other one off!" I yelled for what good was one shoe?

But Vitalka shook his head, got a reel of cotton out of his pocket and tied it to his shoe.

"I'll tow it!" he said.

We swooped sharply down towards the river and flew so low over the water that our feet dipped into it and swept up fountains of spray and foam. Vitalka let go of his shoe and skimmed the water behind us as if it really was in tow. What fun that was!

"A hydrofoil!" I shouted and laughed so much I fell flat on my back and kicked my wet feet in the air.

The thread snapped and the shoe went on swimming along on its own. Sooner or later some unlucky fisherman was bound to fish it out instead of a gudgeon. What a joke! We flew under an old wooden bridge creaking under the weight of heavy lorries, and began climbing towards some old white walls and towers on a grassy slope...

...My memories gradually fade but I still feel happy and lie there smiling in the dark because, you see, it all actually happened. And so what if it's over! What really matters is that it actually happened!

Yes, it really did.

Chapter One

I spent my childhood in a small northern town spreading on the bank of a large river. The houses were mostly made of wood with plank pavements running along their board fences and intricate patterns carved on their lopsided old gates. And behind the gates stretched spacious yards covered with soft grass and dandelions with dense burdock and nettle patches around their edges. In the yards stood sheds and long stacks of pine and birch logs which smelt of forests and mushrooms.

What a lot of space there was! There was even enough for a game of football — unless some had hung out their washing on the lines.

Of course, there were new districts in the town as well, five-storey houses made out of multi-coloured blocks. Here and there you came across old brick buildings with columns and patterned balconies, but most of the streets were lined with one and two-storey wooden houses, which, unlike peasant cottages, had large, two-metre-high windows.

The streets ran down to the steep riverbank where stood a stone monastery which had been built on the orders of Peter the Great.* It was not only a monastery but also a fortress with high walls and towers with narrow loop-holes.

Rising high over the walls and towers and church's domes was a white belfry with a huge round black clock, about three metres in diameter. It was a pity that the clock did not work.

It had stopped a very long time ago, in 1919, during the Civil War.** Word has it that a machine-gunner climbed to the top of the belfry and kept half the town under fire for a long time. Finally, a steam tug, which had been converted into a gunboat and named "World Revolution", chugged round Stony Cape and let rip at the belfry from its gun.

What happened to the machine-gunner is anyone's guess, but the clock was damaged and stopped ringing. Nobody tried to mend it. Its wooden beams and staircase were badly burnt and wrecked and

* Peter the Great (1672-1725) — Russian tsar; it was on his instructions that a navy was formed in Russia, towns and fortresses built, factories and workshops opened and the Academy of Sciences founded.

** The Civil War (1918-1920) — the struggle waged by Russia to defend the state of workers and peasants established after the Revolution of 1917 against counter-revolutionary forces attempting to restore the rule of the rich in the country.

so it was practically impossible to get near the clock. And even if you did, how could you fathom out its complex mechanism? You see, it had been forged from bronze, turned and assembled by a self-taught clock-maker back in the time of Catherine II* and he had not left a draft behind him.

Anyway, who had time for clocks in those days? In the '30s someone decided to blow the whole monastery up and take it apart brick by brick as had been done with several churches. True, the plan was never carried out but nobody thought of repairing the belfry because there were more important things to do, such as build a shipyard and a new port. Then the war** broke out and afterwards there were plenty of other things that needed doing.

That is why the hands on the huge clock-face looming over the town like a black moon stood at five to one for over forty years.

But all the same the belfry was beautiful and famous. It was especially admired by ship captains. All the motorships going downstream from Stony Cape set their course on the belfry and it was on all the pilots' charts.

Motorships often passed by. Vitalka and I would go to sleep and wake up to the sound of their drawn-out and rather sad hooting.

Vitalka and I lived together or, at least, in summer we did, ever since we made friends. And that was simply ages ago and two years before the adventure with the carpet. I was then going on eight and Vitalka had only just turned nine. He saved me then. It's a long story with a sad beginning but a happy ending.

Before I was born, my father had fought in the war against the nazis. He returned home alive but he had had a lung wound. At first it did not cause him much pain and he started working as a physics teacher and married. Then I came along. The years rolled quietly by and then all of a sudden he fell ill again and died.

Mother and I lived alone for almost three years but when I was in the first year at school, Uncle Seva, Vsevolod Sergeyevich, that is, and five-year-old Lena appeared on the scene. He worked in the river-port's administration and wore a cap with an anchor.

But neither this cap nor its owner appealed to me. Nothing about

---

* Catherine II (1729-1796) — Empress of Russia from 1762.

** Second World War in Russia (1941-1945).

him did, not even his manner of talking, rather muffled and hollow, almost the same as Dad's.

He had a thin face, a beard, two straight wrinkles above his thick brows, and large brown eyes. If you weren't trying to find fault with it, you could say it was a perfectly normal and even pleasant face. His eyes weren't angry-looking but quite the reverse and he used to gaze adoringly at Mum and rather guiltily at me.

Who wanted his looks, guilty or not!

Don't imagine I was rude to him or sulked. No, I always said good morning and good night to him and even started calling him Uncle Seva instead of Vsevolod Sergeyevich. Because Mum asked me to. But whenever Uncle Seva tried to pat my shoulder or stroke my head, I shied away as if I had been stung. And I could do nothing about it, and, to tell the truth, did not want to.

And then there was Lenka! She immediately fastened to Mum as if she had always been her daughter. Even started calling her Mummy! Whenever she did that, I shuddered as if cold drops of water were trickling down my neck. Mum once took me aside, stood me in front of her and said quietly, "Oleg, darling... She's only little. And she doesn't even remember her own mother. Can't you understand how hard it is not to have a mother?"

I did understand. Oh yes, I understood that perfectly well! Of course I did! Even in my last year at kindergarten, I was ready to burst into tears if mother was held back and did not arrive in time to pick me up. And whenever she went out to the cinema in the evening, I was plunged into grief as into icy water.

That's why I swallowed the lump in my throat and nodded. But it makes no difference how often you nod if you still feel resentful.

I wasn't mean to Lenka. Sometimes I even went to the kindergarten to collect her. And once I showed her how to make two-funnelled little steamers out of paper. But when Lenka took my china kitten without asking and dropped it smashing it to smithereens that was the last straw. Silently, choking back my tears, I gathered all the pieces in a newspaper (thinking I might glue them back together later) and got my old school satchel from under the sofa.

I stuffed the bits of china into my satchel along with a sweater, a book entitled "The Snow Queen", a bottle of water, half a loaf of bread, a length of sliced sausage, a box of matches and Dad's "For Victory" medal on its black and orange ribbon. Then I took my school

uniform out of the wardrobe: trousers with a neat patch over the left knee, shirt with buttons like army ones except without stars, and belt with a brass buckle inscribed with twigs, a book and the letter "S". Over the long months of school life I had got fed up with this uniform, which was lumbering and heavy like a knight's armour. But what could I do? You won't get far on a long journey without warm clothes.

"Are you going to school?" Lenka asked dejectedly.

"You fool," I said vindictively. "Who goes to school during the holidays?"

I wiped my eyes, snapped my buckle and dug my feet into Mum's rubber boots, which were far too big for me. I turned back their tops so that they looked like hunters' or musketeers' boots and poked the long thin dagger I had made from a metal hack-saw down the right one. Its handle was wrapped in insulating tape and its hilt was made of copper wire. Finally, I put a small spade down my left boot.

I also took the gun with a tight rubber band which fired aluminium-wire pellets. One of them could go right through a thick sheet of paper thirty feet away. And if you hit a wild animal in the eye, it was as good as dead.

Without saying another word to Lenka, I left home, stamping loudly along in my boots and silently bidding farewell to childhood.

I decided to head for the woods on the other side of the river and make a dug-out among the roots of an old tree. I would sleep on bedding made of sweet-smelling forest grass, hunt hares and sit by a small cosy camp-fire in the evenings, talking to my faithful dog and reading it the fairy-tale about the Snow Queen. After covering a whole block at a fairly brisk pace, I began to feel less sure of myself.

In my heart of hearts I knew perfectly well that I would hardly manage to make a real dug-out suitable for living in not only in summer but also winter. I also realised it would be terrifying to sit alone by a camp-fire. And, what's more, I felt very bad about killing lovely, sweet little hares which I had read tons of stories about.

But most of all (why make a secret of it?) I felt sad about leaving Mum.

My faithful dog Jim (which lived in our street and was not really mine) treacherously left me as soon as I had fed it my last bit of sausage. I stopped at a crossroads completely at a loss about what to do next.

I would have been simply delighted if Mum and Uncle Seva had spotted me then: they should have been coming back from the cinema at any moment. Mum would have taken me firmly by the hand, led me home, given me a good scolding and perhaps even put me in the corner behind the wash basin. But I wouldn't have minded! I would have been captured but not defeated. But how could I go home myself! It would be such a disgrace and such a defeat!

But Mum and Uncle Seva did not appear, and all that was left for me to do was lie down in the gutter and die of grief. However, this was not a very suitable place to die in, firstly, because passers-by would see me and, secondly, because although it was evening, it was very hot and I was sweating in my trekking gear. Just try lying down to die in such stifling heat! You wouldn't lie there long, I assure you.

So nothing was left to do but keep going. I wandered on, and another half block later destiny sent me Vitalka, who was trotting along the edge of the pavement, rolling a barrel hoop ahead of him. He stopped a short distance away from me and spun the hoop round and round until it became a transparent ball. Then he burst out laughing, banged the "ball" on its head, stopped its spinning, looked up and spotted me.

"Hey, Oleg! Where are you off to?"

We knew each other by sight but had never been friends. We simply played in the same crowd sometimes. I did not even know where he lived.

But it just so happened that it was he I ran into on my sad journey.

"Going to camp?" he asked.

I knew that if I started speaking, I would burst into tears and so I just shook my head. Vitalka stopped laughing and enquired in a different tone, "Going to the woods?"

I nodded. Vitalka grew serious and for some reason or other put the hoop over his shoulder, looked me over, taking in my boots and satchel and asked quietly, "For good?"

I did not even wonder how he had guessed, as all that mattered now was keeping my tears back and so I nodded again.

Vitalka walked round me, carefully touched my satchel and then stood in front of me again. For the very first time I had a good look at Vitalka's eyes.

He was a wise fellow even in those days.

"What'll you do alone in the woods?" he asked. "Better come to my place."

If I had not been afraid of opening my mouth, I would have started arguing. How could I go home with someone I hardly knew? He'd probably get into hot water with his folks who would say he had brought a tramp in from the street.

But I could not say anything and standing there in silence was ridiculous and so, with hanging head, I set off beside Vitalka.

He took me into an old house, through its hall and up a creaking staircase to a small low-ceilinged room furnished with a couch on blocks, a lopsided table and an antiquated chair with voluted arms and a spring sticking out of its bottom. Its walls were lined with pictures of some sort but I did not pay any attention to them at the time.

Vitalka dragged my satchel off me and said, "Look, you're sweaty all over. Slip your things off and go and wash."

It was a relief to clamber out of my armour-like trekking gear. Vitalka gave me his old slippers to wear instead of my boots and took me downstairs to the wash basin.

The basin turned out to be just like the one at home: blue enamelled with a long bolt for a tap which you pushed up and then a stream of water gushed into your palms.

So familiar and homely was the basin that I hurriedly dipped my face into my palms full of water.

At once I began feeling better.

"Perhaps everything will sort itself out after all," I thought.

Vitalka obviously sensed that I had cheered up for he slapped his wet palm on my back above the low neck of my tee-shirt and said brightly, "Quick march!"

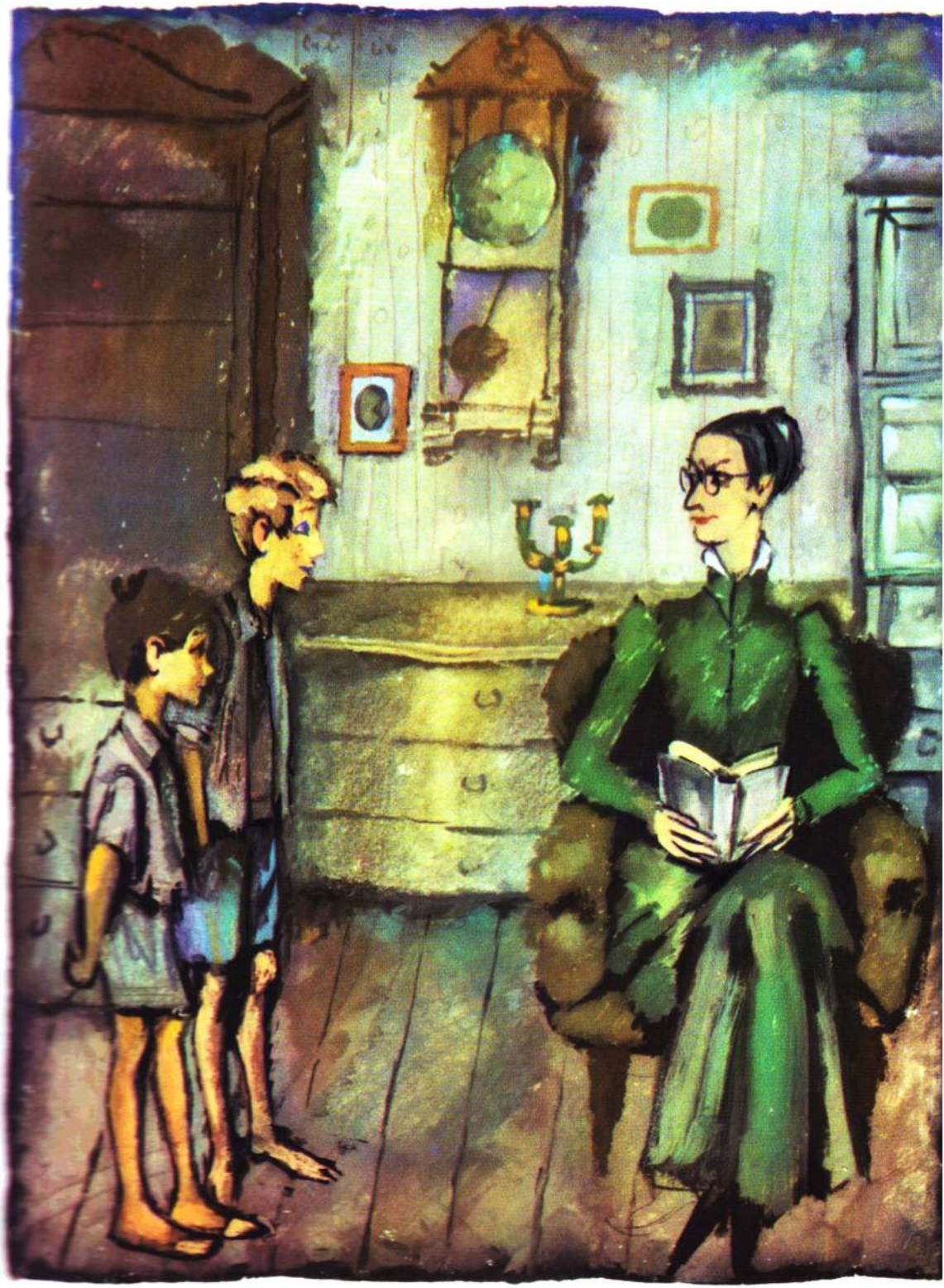
We "quick marched" into a room with a cut-glass chandelier which was on although it was still quite light outside. This sparkling glassy light was all I noticed at first.

"Auntie Valya, this is Oleg. Give us something to eat, will you?" said Vitalka.

And then I spotted Auntie Valya.

"Go-od ev-en-ing..." I stammered in terror.

Auntie Valya was looking at us over her spectacles. She was tall, hook-nosed and wearing a blue dress with a stand-up collar. Her smooth hair was gathered in a tight bun at the back. I had seen stern thin ladies like her in an English film about a boy called David Copperfield, but never before had I met anyone like her in real life.



She nodded in reply to my "good evening" and said to Vitalka, "Something to eat? Well... But have you washed your hands?"

Vitalka stretched out his palms spread wide and waved them about, and as I did not dare to he took my hands and showed them to Auntie Valya too.

"Well, in that case..." she said. "Off you go to the kitchen."

Then we ate sausages and hot potatoes and drank cold milk. I remembered mother's lessons on how to behave at other people's houses and sat straight with my elbows off the table and tried to handle my knife and fork properly.

But Vitalka dangled his legs and drank the milk noisily.

"You ought to learn some table manners from your friend," remarked Auntie Valya.

"He's just feeling shy because it's his first visit here," retorted Vitalka fearlessly. (Alas, he later proved to be right.)

"Do you live far away?" Auntie Valya asked me.

"Why, no!" Vitalka hurriedly intervened. "He lives in our street, at Number Fourteen where that dog Jim comes from. Know where I mean?"

I expected Auntie Valya to angrily ask why she should remember dogs called Jim, but she simply nodded.

"He's going to stay here tonight," said Vitalka in a very casual sort of way.

Auntie Valya raised her brows slightly.

"Here we go," I thought with dread and got ready to be bombarded with questions. Auntie Valya glanced at Vitalka, however, lowered her brows and said, "Take another pillow upstairs."

...We lay down on Vitalka's couch. It was rather cramped but it did not matter...

"Out with it then," ordered Vitalka.

I knew I would have to tell him. The only problem was I did not know how to explain everything.

"Left home for good?" Vitalka whispered.

I sighed.

"Had a thrashing?" he asked understandingly.

"Why, no! Nobody even laid a finger on me!"

"But you've been hurt in other ways, have you?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat again.

"No, it's not that... It's because of Lenka... Well, not only her but things in general. And because of the kitten..."

And so I began telling him. And very soon, of course, burst into tears. Vitalka did not try and comfort me but simply asked me to repeat certain things when I paused. And after hearing me out, he said wisely, "Well, never mind. This sort of thing often happens..."

"Yes, that's true!" I thought. "But whatever's going on at home now?" I threw back the blanket.

"Where are you off to?"

"I'm going home. Mum's probably out searching for me..."

Vitalka drew the blanket over me.

"She knows. Auntie Valya went and told her. You can go home tomorrow."

I felt absolutely exhausted. Gratefully I nuzzled against Vitalka's bony shoulder and fell fast asleep.

I woke up very early, left Vitalka asleep and carefully tiptoed down into the hall and unlatched the door.

And then I rushed home like the wind! Mum was waiting for me by the gate. She took hold of my shoulders. Her palms were dry and hot.

I smiled inanely and looked down at my feet in Vitalka's slippers.

"Oleg, darling," she said, "promise me that you won't set off on any distant journeys without warning me first. Agreed?"

"Okay..." I replied hoarsely and buried my face in mother's blouse.

Later that day I ran over to see Vitalka. He must have been waiting for me because he was sitting on the porch under the patterned awning watching me walk up.

"Come for your things?" he asked.

"No. I've just dropped round... Is that alright?"

He smiled and at once seemed the same age as me and no older.

"Let's climb up to my watch-tower!"

...In the evening we persuaded mother to let me sleep at Vitalka's again.

"He's got a telescope. We're going to look at the moon," I said in a pleading tone, hopping with impatience.

"And we haven't finished making our soldiers," Vitalka chimed in.

Mum sighed for some reason and gave in.

...And so my things stayed at Vitalka's. Even Mum's boots, and Dad's medal, and the gun, the dagger and the kitten, too. Vitalka's father,

Andrei Nikolayevich, glued it together when he came back from one of his trips. He also knocked together another bed opposite Vitalka's, pulled his cap (just like Uncle Seva's) over my ears and said, "Enjoy yourselves, lads..."

Chapter Two

Andrei Nikolayevich Gorodetsky was the captain of the cargo motorboat *Tobolsk*. He sailed down the river from our town to the sea, and sometimes even sailed across the sea. Vitalka's mother always went with him, working either a cook or a waitress. They were away for a month or more at a time and spent only a few days at home between trips. And thus they worked from springtime until the rivers became icebound. While they were away Vitalka and Auntie Valya lived alone (and then I appeared).

They lived in a spacious old house which Auntie Valya's grandfather had bought in his youth. Auntie Valya told how her grandfather had been most reluctant to buy it but was then appointed principal of a grammar school and it was considered improper for a headmaster to live in a rented apartment. In the small town he was regarded as a very important person. Later, however, he got the sack because revolutionaries had been holding meetings in his house. Nevertheless, the house continued to be known as the "principal's" right up to the 1917 Revolution, and the authorities always regarded it as a "dangerous den".

There were many old things in the house. Staring down grimly at Vitalka and me from framed photographs on the walls were bearded men in long uniform coats and ladies in ankle-length dresses. Behind the coloured-glass panels of the dresser sparkling cut-glass goblets were lined. Auntie Valya cherished them greatly. There was a book-case containing thick tomes and journals. The books seemed boring to us but we sometimes browsed through the bound collections of literary journals.

Auntie Valya had a cuckoo clock with a large cuckoo covered with real feathers, which used to spring or rather flop out of a little window every half-hour and hang on a thin spring, hoarsely crying something half-way between "cuckoo" and "quack-quack". Vitalka and I were

often woken up at night by this eerie cry, but Auntie Valya never awoke although she slept in the same room where the clock was. She was a deep sleeper, and this often saved us from a scolding.

The kitchen was dominated by a huge bronze samovar with medals stamped in its round belly. Whenever he was at home, Andrei Nikolayevich enjoyed "stoking the works", as he put it, and we would spend the whole evening sitting at the table while the samovar hissed and puffed and pretended to be angry.

But the gramophone with its huge horn stood completely idle as Auntie Valya played even her favourite old records of Chaliapin and Sobinov* on an ordinary modern record-player. And so the old gramophone simply dozed under a crocheted napkin on a little table in the corner. Of course it felt neglected! After all, its mechanism and powerful spring worked just as well as they had done years ago.

When Auntie Valya went out, we used to stand the gramophone on the floor, unhook its horn, wind its handle as far as it would go and then take turns to sit on its turntable, which was covered with crimson velvet. Slowly and then faster and faster the gramophone would spin you round.

Oh, what fun it was! The room whirled round and round and everything would turn into multi-coloured stripes. The main thing was not to get frightened and keep your balance so you did not fly off the turntable. Well, and if you did, it did not matter much: you simply crashed to the floor, sat there until your head stopped spinning, and then got up. Getting to his feet, Vitalka always used to slap the back of his trousers in a business-like manner to make sure the record pintle had not made a hole in them and then say, "What good training it is! Just like being test pilots!"

Nowadays any boy would say, "Just like being astronauts", but there weren't any at that time for, you see, Vitalka and I became friends three months before the first sputnik was launched.

Auntie Valya, it seemed to me, guessed about our antics with the gramophone. In fact, she guessed about many things and forgave many things, too, because she only looked strict.

Incidentally, she was the sister of Vitalka's grandmother and not his aunt, and Vitalka's father was her nephew. He had lost his

---

* Fyodor Ivanovich Chaliapin (1873-1938) and Leonid Vitalyevich Sobinov (1872-1934) — famous Russian singers.

parents at an early age and she had brought him up. And now she was bringing up Vitalka, and me into the bargain because I used to stay at their house for days at a time during the summer months.

So how did she go about our upbringing? Well, she considered that boys should not smoke, gamble or swear, and that was all she really minded about.

As for smoking... Well, we did try once. I found a sealed packet of cigarettes in a ditch one day and we hid behind the shed and lit up... It was ghastly! I went around for the rest of the day feeling as if I had drunk a bowl of soapy water and everything around was wrapped in a revolting pea-green fog. Vitalka did not feel any better either. I never touched a cigarette since even when I grew up. I once asked Vitalka when he was much older if he had started smoking and he replied as he had done as a young lad, "Do you think I'm bonkers?"

We never gambled either. More often than not we did not have any money and if we did, we shared it. So what was the point of winning it off each other?

We sometimes used swear words but Auntie Valya did not understand them because we made them up on the spur of the moment, depending on what had happened. Sometimes they sounded like the curses of foreign pirates or oaths of Martians.

Generally speaking Auntie Valya regarded us as perfectly normal children and whenever she got really fed up with our pranks and escapades, she would say, "Vitaly and Oleg! You're quite impossible people."

That meant she was really angry and we had to keep quiet and mind how we behaved. And if we did not, she would say, "I'll turn you out of the house and you can sleep in the yard until you learn to behave decently again."

But not once did she ever drop a hint to me that it was her house and not mine and that I ought not forget this, for, to tell the truth, I sometimes did.

Mum felt I was running away from home because of Uncle Seva and Lenka and this upset her, but it was no longer true. You see, Vitalka and I had become inseparable and there was nothing else to it.

Mum finally realised this but something else continued to worry her. You see, I had never suffered from lack of appetite, and I ate more meals at Auntie Valya's than at home.

"How can she feed the two of you on her pension?" Mum would ask anxiously.

She was not reassured when I informed her that besides Auntie Valya's pension, she also had Vitalka's parents' wages. I found out later that Mum had even tried to offer Auntie Valya money for my "keep" but Auntie Valya had firmly said, "We'll let this matter drop."

Auntie Valya never said much in general and if everything was running smoothly, we knew beforehand what she would say. For instance, in the mornings she used to thump the ceiling with her mop handle and call, "Gentlemen! The sun's up! It's time you were, too!"

And before breakfast she was bound to say, "I do hope you've washed, even if it was a lick and a promise?"

And in the evenings when we came in from the street after a hard day, she always said, "Lord! Just look at yourselves!"

Well, and if we had, what would we have seen? The likenesses of our Mums and Dads, I suppose (although I only saw my dad on photographs then). Otherwise, ordinary little boys. Each, of course, something special as well.

Vitalka was slightly taller than me with fair hair which was always far too long and unkempt. He had long greyish-green eyes, a large mouth, thick lips, but a thin, very slightly hooked nose with five yellow freckles on it. If you looked at his eyes, mouth and nose separately they somehow did not seem to go together, but if you looked at them all together, you got Vitalka.

I hardly remember what I was like. The only photograph of that time I still have is of mother, Uncle Seva, Lenka and me. On it I am well-groomed, lobster-eyed and amazingly clean and tidy. Vitalka used to say that apart from my sticking-out ears, I did not look at all like myself in that picture.

And, anyway, I hardly ever looked in a mirror.

True, there was one mirror I was always passing: it stood in the hall at the foot of the stairs and was cloudy, tarnished and full-length. Whenever I dashed past it to run up the stairs, a puny, thin-legged lad with peeling sunburnt shoulders would dash past with me in this mirror as if it were a dark narrow doorway.

But I never got a really good look at myself because there was never time. I was always hurrying upstairs to our cabin, our headquarters, our fortress and kingdom, our watch-tower. It was like a little house built on top of a larger one and consisted of only one small room, its walls made of bare boards. All sorts of tiny creatures, such as spiders, beetles and crickets, lived in the cracks between these creaky old boards, but we weren't afraid of them and did them no harm.

The walls were decorated with my wooden weapons and Vitalka's paintings — not all of them, of course, but the best ones — and I was especially fond of "The Flying Dutchman" and "The Revolt of the Gladiators".

"The Flying Dutchman" showed a mysterious dark frigate with tattered sails. The pointed end of a crescent moon was peeping through the largest hole in the sail and a small yellow light was burning faintly on the stern.

The "Gladiators" was even better. It showed rebellious gladiators in Roman circus chasing rich men in long robes down marble steps.

Hanging there, too, was a huge old-fashioned watch belonging to Auntie Valya's grandfather. It was silver, bulbous and French-made and she had given it to us so that we learnt to appreciate the value of time. However, she did not let us touch it and always wound it herself.

The room had two windows facing south and north. The bright sun used to shine through the south window all day long and in the evenings a large star whose name we did not know used to twinkle in the radiant sky seen through the north window. Sometimes a pink porous moon peeped into that window from the east.

We used to study the moon through a small brass telescope which Auntie Valya had also inherited from her grandfather and we used to imagine how long, long ago his pupils had observed the planets through similar telescopes.

Despite its venerable age, the telescope was still in good working order and the moon through it looked like a huge crispy round loaf, and seemed so close you felt you could reach out and touch it.

...I only have to shut my eyes and I remember everything in the minutest detail. No, more than that, it's as if I am back in the small room again.

It is quite dark. The telescope is standing on a window-sill and Vitalka and I are squatting down in front of it. In the gloaming our beetles and crickets are rustling and scraping about in the cracks and under the pictures on the walls. The telescope smells sourly of old brass. Vitalka is breathing rapidly as he looks through the eyepiece and I am sitting beside him, with my cheek pressed against his, waiting for my turn. His shaggy hair is tickling my temple.

All of a sudden Vitalka says in a whisper, "Those schoolboys, all those years ago, d'you think they studied the planets in the same way?"

"Of course they did!"

"But it was so long ago... It's even hard to imagine. After all, they didn't even have electricity then."

"So what? The telescope was invented by Galileo even longer ago. You've been looking through it for a whole hour now, Vitalka. Move over..."

He moved his head aside and I pressed my eye to the eyepiece.

...Looming before me all of a sudden was a terrifyingly mysterious and alien world. A bumpy desert with stone rings and craters... What was it like? Who lived there? Would we ever find out?

Vitalka and I were firmly convinced that space flights would start any day now. After all, several Sputniks were already circling the Earth. However, this did not make the Moon seem any less mysterious.

"...You've been looking for a whole hour," grumbled Vitalka.

I tore myself away from the telescope with a sigh. What's that? Could that golden rosy disc shining high above the attics and aerials really be the same planet that was so close only a moment ago?

Vitalka sat by the eyepiece while I climbed onto the warm window-sill and sat next to the telescope with my legs dangling inside. Close by my elbow its dark lense seemed like a huge bulging eye, and the moon's reflection was floating deep inside it like a golden seed.

I grinned craftily and covered the lense with my palm. The telescope jerked angrily.

"What are you doing?" asked Vitalka.

"It's a Martian spaceship flying by."

"You'll be flying yourself if you don't watch out," threatened Vitalka. "Down to the planet Earth. How about that?"

"No, I'm fine up here, thanks... Look, Vitalka, there's a motor-ship. Perhaps it's the *Tobolsk*?"

Over the roofs, firs and poplars the silhouette of a ship with three coloured lights appeared round the bend of the light bank of the river.

Vitalka quickly climbed through the window, sat down next to me, took the telescope off its stand and looked through it. We often did this when we wanted to watch the things going on around us. True, everything in the telescope was upside down but this made it even more interesting.

After gazing for about half a minute through the eyepiece like Admiral Nelson in the film "Lady Hamilton", Vitalka shook his head in disappointment and said, "So much for your motor-ship! It's a tug. Land-lubber, that's what you are!"

I should have shoved Vitalka into the room for saying this, sat astride him and pulled his ears. But, first of all, I'm not sure I was strong enough and, secondly, I felt rather awkward because my mother was just across the road whereas his parents had been far away for a whole month and I had aroused a false hope in him.

To take his mind off it, I said, "There definitely aren't any people on the Moon. But as for Mars... Well, if there are..."

"Then what?" asked Vitalka.

"If there are... It means there must be boys on it, too?"

"Well... I suppose so..."

"I wonder if they play at soldiers?"

Chapter Three

Playing at soldiers was our favourite game. We started it the first summer we made friends and two years later had several large shoe-boxes containing a huge army: about three thousand

infantrymen, cavalrymen, gunners and scouts. Our brave men were about the size of a little finger. We drew them on cardboard and then cut them out with nail scissors.

Or, to be more precise, it was Vitalka who drew them for even then he was already a fine artist and, most importantly, he had a fantastic imagination and made tons of different-coloured uniforms, feathered helmets, drums and banners...

However, it was I who made the entire artillery for both armies. Auntie Valya used to give us empty cotton reels which at once became gun barrels and wheels. From the cannons we fired peas, dried ashberries and the tiny glass beads which Auntie Valya also gave us and which were heavy and especially lethal shells.

Whenever it was drizzling and we did not feel like going outside, we would lay out a battlefield on the floor, spreading a mounted formation of dragoon and hussar regiments over a wide front, hiding scouts and observers in little nooks and crannies and standing our different-coloured infantrymen and chasseurs in square formation. Next we laid out our batteries, put a pile of shells by each cannon and attached rubber bands to the barrels...

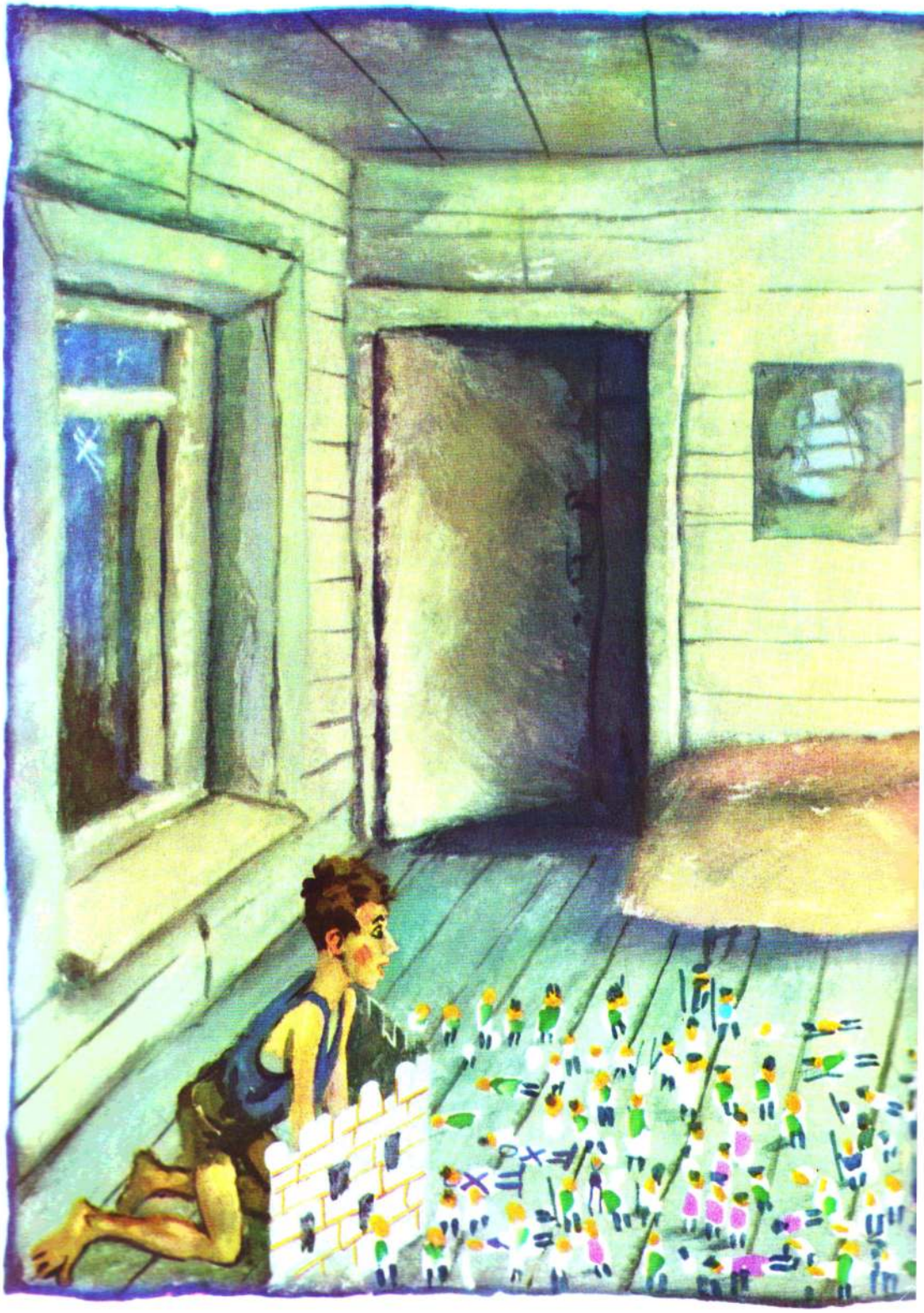
The artillery would ruthlessly mow down the cardboard troops, and defensive breastwork, redoubts and bulwarks would have to be quickly erected.

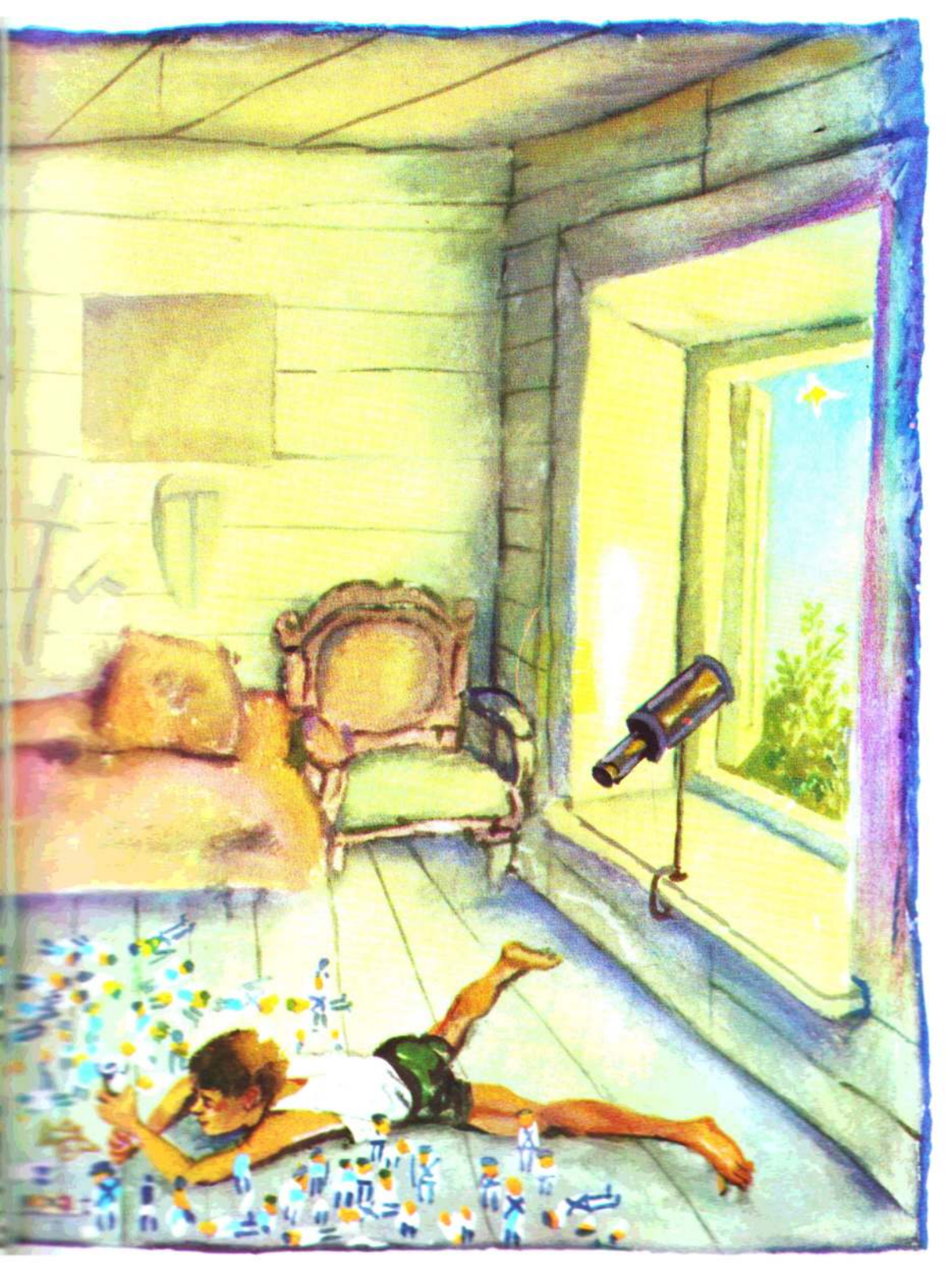
Then one day Vitalka hid his army behind a high thick paper wall which had bricks painted on it and looked just like an impregnable fortress.

In their brightly-coloured mauve and blue uniforms my generals were, like me, completely nonplussed for a while. Then, however, they hid from enemy fire behind an upturned stool and held a council of war (while Vitalka's artillery kept up a barrage from loop-holes). And five minutes later we declared to our enemy, "Ha-ha! We aren't afraid of the big bad wolf!"

Then we lifted the cannons' wheels onto supports so that their barrels were pointing upwards and opened high-angled mortar fire. The shells flew into the air and then rained down on our enemies' heads. Panic broke out behind the fortress wall. Falling into the soldiers' midst, the shells bounced off the floor and struck someone or other every time.

Entering upon negotiations, Commander-in-Chief Vitalka accused us of violating the honourable rules of warfare. He argued





that our shells were bouncing off the ceiling and this was making their blows harder.

"Well, that's great!" I said ruthlessly. "That's just what we want."

"But it's not fair. In real life the sky isn't hard and so shells can't possibly bounce off it."

"But we're playing at old-fashioned war. At that time people still didn't know that the sky wasn't hard. On the contrary, they were always talking about the heavenly firmament!"

"Well, so what! It still wasn't hard then either," retorted Vitalka, smashing my cunning argument.

"How do you know?" I blurted out. "Perhaps it was. After all, nobody flew up and checked, did they?"

Vitalka blinked, obviously at a loss, then came up with a real plum, "How do you know nobody did? Perhaps they did!"

"Ha, ha!" I said. "Well, what did they fly in, then?"

"Ho, ho," replied Vitalka gloomily, realising he had lost the agrument. "Magic carpets."

I glanced at him with pity and sighed.

If only we had known...

But we did not know anything yet and were completely absorbed in the battle.

"Take your wall away and I'll lower my cannons," I suggested.

"Get stuffed!" graciously rejoined Field-Marshal Gorodetsky and swiftly re-formed his troops in long columns with large gaps between them. His losses at once diminished. Then he opened his fortress gates and led a troop of silver-foil armoured knights into the attack.

To protect my left flank, I hurriedly set about building a redoubt out of dominoes...

And so on and on raged the battle.

The floor in our room was made of large blocks of some sort of wood which was not found locally. Over the years the soft wood had become worn and grooved and its surface was now streaked with hard prominent veins. It was painful crawling across it on all fours but we did not think about ourselves in the heat of the battle. Changing positions, rushing from our infantry to our cannons and from one flank to another, we crashed onto the floor this way and that, making such a racket that the cut-glass tinkled

in Auntie Valya's dresser downstairs and our elbows and knees became deeply imprinted with red patterns from the wooden floor.

We regarded these imprints and bruises as war wounds and were even proud of them. But looking us over after yet another battle, Auntie Valya would shake her head and wince. Women always feel sorry for war casualties. However, if you ask me, it was her dainty glasses and jugs that Auntie Valya felt really sorry for. Once she even said, "My dear generals! I want to save you from injury and the house from destruction."

Vitalka and I exchanged glances. Had we really driven poor Auntie Valya to such a state of despair that she had decided to turn us out of our watch-tower?

"There's a carpet in my box-room," she informed us. "Of course, it's not very new but if you beat the dust out of it and clean it, you can lay it on the floor upstairs, and then there'll be much less din and battering."

A carpet? Hurrah! We could have wrestling matches on it, simply lie side-by-side on it and talk about everything under the sun. Or drag it out onto the roof and sunbathe on it without worrying about scratching our stomachs on iron sheeting. Or make a tent or shelter of some kind out of it and live in it like nomads!

It's only grown-ups who think carpets can only be hung on walls or laid on floors. But we, you see, knew the true value of things!

The carpet was standing in a large roll against a corner of the box-room. We had, of course, been there several times before but had never taken any notice of it because it was partly hidden behind all sorts of junk. As we forced our way towards it, I scraped myself against a broken bird cage and a holey silk lampshade fell on Vitalka's head.

The roll was certainly impressive-looking. I patted its woven back and it was hard and rough to the touch.

"It's probably terribly heavy," I sighed.

"Yes, you're right there. If it falls on us, we'll be squashed like flies." Vitalka consoled me. "Well, let's have a go..."

The carpet turned out to be amazingly light.

"It's as light as a feather!" said Vitalka in surprise.

We dragged it out into the corridor in no time at all and then lifted it onto our shoulders and solemnly carried it out into the yard,

Vitalka walking ahead with the red silk lampshade swaying on his head like a bell.

"Give it a good beating now," Auntie Valya called after us.

We unrolled it on the grass and saw it was about three metres long and two metres wide, a dingy grey colour and smelt of store-rooms, mould and old sacks.

"It stinks," said Vitalka and broke off a large old burdock stalk while I went to look for the mop stick by the porch.

We began beating it from both sides and the dust flew up like smoke from a volcano. The carpet shook and wriggled as if it were alive. We sneezed and giggled and from the porch Auntie Valya kept admonishing us not to beat it so hard or else the neighbours would call out the fire brigade.

Finally we grew tired and stopped sneezing. The breeze carried away the cloud of dust. Now we could make out the carpet's pattern. Well, it was just like any other and nothing to write home about, with various jagged triangles, and angular squiggles round its edges, and two large superimposed squares in its centre formed an octagonal star with another star inside it like a cog-wheel. After being cleaned the carpet was still grey, and its pattern a faded reddish-brown. It still smelt of the box-room, and its pile where it had not been worn out now looked wiry and springy.

But what did it matter! We were exhausted! We looked at one another and both flopped onto the carpet. I collapsed with my eyes tightly shut and so my first sensation was particularly amazing. It seemed as if I had fallen onto something soft, silky, warm and alive and not onto an old carpet.

I opened my eyes in surprise and sat up. My palms slid across the carpet's bristly surface which looked hard and prickly but felt as if I was stroking an affectionate wild animal with a short but fluffy coat. Vitalka was squatting nearby and staring at me in bewilderment.

I silently lay face downwards, pressed my cheek, bare arms and legs against the lovely warm carpet, and cuddled it. Then I felt that it smelt not only of mould and mice but also of something mysterious and strange that reminded me of the South. It was as if someone had rubbed the seeds of some foreign plants into its fibre.

Sighing, I opened my eyes and saw that Vitalka was lying there in the same way with his nose pointing towards me.

"Why, this is really something," he said, smiling with his cheek still pressed against the carpet.

I said nothing because Vitalka was certainly right.

"Auntie Valya's grandad probably brought it back from somewhere like Persia," Vitalka went on. "Auntie Valya told me he did a lot of travelling when he was young."

"Yes, it was probably made by some old craftsmen whose secret has since been lost," I said.

"Probably..." said Vitalka.

We turned over slowly onto our backs.

"But didn't Auntie Valya know that it's... like this? Why did she stuff it in her box-room?"

"Perhaps she did but then forgot," replied Vitalka. "After all, she's... well, you know, not as young as she used to be. Elderly people forget a lot of things."

"But she's got a good memory," I stood up for her.

"Well, yes, she has... But perhaps she didn't realise what it was like. After all, she didn't roll on it like us."

"Why not?" I asked in surprise.

Vitalka grinned and said, "Well, you've seen that photo of her as a young girl, haven't you? In a dress almost down to her ankles, with all sorts of frills and lace and a bow at the back, and high buttoned boots. Just try and roll about dressed like that!"

Feeling sorry for Auntie Valya, who had been deprived of such pleasure, I blissfully stretched out on the carpet and began stroking it again.

"It feels alive, doesn't it? And we beat the poor thing with sticks..."

"Never mind," said Vitalka, consolingly. "It's clean now — unlike us."

He bent his grimy arm and blew on it and I spotted a red drop on his elbow.

"Look, you've scratched yourself," I said.

Smiling, Vitalka touched the drop with his little finger and the drop snapped in half, releasing a pair of transparent little wings and flew off into the thick grass.

"Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home..." said Vitalka after it had already disappeared.

"I wonder if ladybirds can fly high up in the sky like planes," I said.

"Nope," said Vitalka. "Why should they? They live in the grass, after all."

"Yes, but what if it wanted to? All of a sudden?"

"It never would want to," said Vitalka. "You may perhaps because you're a person. But it's just an insect."

I was lying with my arms spread out, with my left palm in the grass and the tall stem of a dandelion between my fingers. Absent-mindedly I started playing with it while thinking about how I would still try to fly higher and higher even if I were a ladybird. Of course, high up the pressure's different and it's cold and there's not enough air but I would still keep on flying until my breath ran out.

I imagined myself lying here like this and slowly starting to rise towards a solitary cloud pierced through with July sunlight.

All of a sudden the ground under the carpet seemed to stir and everything around moved. Something similar happens when you feel giddy for a moment or two. The dandelion stem I was holding dived down and its fluffy head slipped through my fingers, spilling its seeds. Then I noticed that a cracked old barrel standing nearby was sinking down too.

"Mummy!" I shrieked and tumbled into the grass.

I had quite a painful fall because the carpet was already about five feet off the ground!..

Even now I feel embarrassed when I recall this incident. You see, the fact remains that I took fright and ditched Vitalka. The only consolation I have is that Vitalka did the same: he shrieked and flopped into the grass, only from the other edge of the carpet.

And then we sat in the flattened grass and stared in horror at each other.

"What are you up to?" asked Vitalka.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"How did you do it?"

"I didn't! Honest, I didn't," I replied because I realised at last that Vitalka thought I had been playing a trick on him.

The carpet landed smoothly between us like a large sheet of paper. I hiccupped and said, "That's who did it."

Vitalka looked round thoughtfully, glanced under the carpet for some reason and then stared enquiringly at me again. All sorts of conjectures and fantastic ideas flashed through my mind: Perhaps

it was a little earthquake that shook us up?.. Perhaps we were both dreaming or hypnotised?.. Perhaps... Perhaps... But what on earth could it have been?!

I hiccupped again and asked Vitalka, "Shall we have a go?"

"Well... all right...." he said unenthusiastically.

Slowly we sat down on the carpet as if it were a hotplate.

"It's not g-going up," said Vitalka.

"That means, we just imagined it did."

"Both of us?"

I hiccupped a third time and rubbed my bruise. Had I imagined my bruise too?

"Did you do anything when it ... well, you know what?" asked Vitalka in a whisper.

"No, nothing. I wasn't even thinking of it."

"What were you thinking of, then?" asked Vitalka exactingly.

"Wait a mo ... well, of the ladybird, I think... And whether it would fly up to the clouds or not."

"You *were* thinking about flying," said Vitalka excitedly. "So that's it... Let's have a go!" He screwed up his eyes and ordered. "Come on! Let's try!"

The carpet lay still.

"Off we go!" Vitalka said and began rocking as if urging the carpet on.

But it did not move.

"I want to go up to the roof," said Vitalka, almost pleading. And I did, too. It was rather frightening but I still wanted the carpet to move and the wall of the house to slide down smoothly and the patterned eaves to loom before us.

And then... And then we were lifted up by a gentle, caressing force. We saw straight ahead the edge of the iron roof and the wooden eaves with their dainty carving and round openings from one of which a sparrow was curiously peering at us as though from a port-hole.

My first instinct was to do my trick again, holler and tumble off [illegible] Vitalka grabbed hold of my shirt and yelled, "Don't! We're too [illegible]gh up..."

I froze and the carpet began to descend slowly.

"That's it," whispered Vitalka. "You can't jump off every time. We've got to get used to it."

And with these words we landed.

"If only we knew what makes it fly," said Vitalka in a whisper again and then had another go, "Well, come on! Let's fly!"

Then I guessed...

"You don't have to order it! You just have to want to fly. I mean, you just have to imagine you're flying... Wait a mo..."

I looked at the clumps of wormwood and burdocks growing by the fence and thought how we would be rising and skimming over the grass towards them... And off we went!

I mentally did a complete turn by the fence and imagined I was circling and the carpet obeyed!

"Faster!" I not so much commanded as willed it. The oncoming wind began rustling as we flashed by the log, the porch, the shed and past the log pile again... Then I landed in the middle of the yard. My heart was booming like a drum. Vitalka was sitting close to me and clinging onto my shoulder.

"Now you have a go," I said generously. "You know how? Just imagine you're flying all by yourself and that's all there is to it."

"I see," he said hurriedly. "Right ... now..."

We gently rose again and the carpet cut across the yard, flew smoothly over the fence and over the street and I noticed a square shadow racing along the road below.

"What are you doing? We'll be spotted!" I yelled.

We flew back into the yard and landed smoothly in the same place as before.

"It does as it's told..." said Vitalka in a quiet delighted voice.

"Does as it's told!" I said reproachfully. "Why on earth did you go over the street? Somebody might see us!"

Vitalka beamed and shrugged his shoulders.

"So what. After all, it's only a dream..."

He sprawled on his back, and, dreamily kicking his legs in the air, said with a wistful sigh, "It's a lovely dream. If only it would last for a long time."

I glanced at his shaggy hair, grabbed hold of a fair lock and pulled it quite hard.

"Ow!" he roared, "What did you do that for, you jammy toadog?"

"See, you're not dreaming!" I said but then all of a sudden an alarming thought occurred to me: what if I was?!

"Now you pinch me," I said quickly.

Vitalka got his own back by pinching me really hard above the

elbow and I yelled not so much with pain as with joy for it meant I wasn't dreaming after all!

And so, delirious with joy, we hugged one another and romped about the carpet, bashing all the remaining dust out of it with our elbows and feet. Then we stopped for it suddenly occurred to us both that we might be hurting it, and so we quietened down and began stroking it like a big dog. Vitalka thoughtfully touched the lock of hair I had tugged and said, "You mean this is really happening and it's not a dream?"

Chapter Four

We laid the carpet between the camp-beds in our watch-tower and then began anxiously to wonder if it would fly again. So we sat down and tried to fly up to the ceiling.

"Hurrah! We've done it!"

Then Auntie Valya banged on the ceiling and called, "Soldiers! Your dinner's getting cold!"

Catching sight of us, she gasped and ordered us to fill the tub with water and wash each other clean. We meekly did as we were told.

That meal-time we behaved so perfectly that Auntie Valya began worrying we might have swallowed some germs with the dust and gone down with something. However, after feeling our foreheads and setting her mind at rest, she told us to go and buy some potatoes at the market after lunch. Now, this was the chore we hated most — dragging a heavy basket right across town in the baking heat. This time, however, we joyfully jumped at the idea.

Anything to make the time pass more quickly!

Anything to make the night come sooner! For we could only test the magic carpet out properly at night. If we did so in the daytime, you can imagine what a rumpus we would cause in the town!

Of course, we did not wait until it grew completely dark. In mid-summer the nights here are silvery as if the air has been sprinkled with aluminium dust. Sometimes you can even see well enough to read a book, especially if it is printed in bold type. At night, however, the streets become deserted and there is less risk of being noticed.

We brought back the potatoes and loitered about in the yard for a while. All of a sudden a frightening thought occurred to us: what if the carpet had lost its magic powers? So we ran up to our watch-tower to check. The carpet dutifully lifted us up to the ceiling. Feeling slightly dazed again, we tiptoed downstairs and sat down to a game of chess, but we could not concentrate. Then we went into a nearby side-street where some lads were playing football, but our heart was not in the game, and five minutes later my sixth-former neighbour Klim told us to sit on the reserves bench.

Then we went down to the river for a swim but it did not seem much fun that day.

And what on earth had happened to time?! It seemed to be standing still to torment us.

We went to bed well before sunset, alarming Auntie Valya once more. She felt our foreheads again, and we had to assure her we had worn ourselves out playing football. She shook her head and left us.

"How on earth does it work though?" Vitalka whispered for the thousandth time, and this made me angry.

"What does it matter! The main thing is that it works!"

Ignoring my bad temper, Vitalka said, "We've always been taught that fairy-tales are only make-believe. Does this mean the carpet isn't?"

"Oh, yes it is. Only it's real as well," I objected.

"But perhaps it's a kind of machine? Remember that book *The Secret of the Yellow Star?* Its inhabitants had similar flying machines controlled by the mind! Ratioplanes, they called them! They invented ... well, you know, against gravity! What did they call it?.."

"Antigravitation. But that was on another planet!" I said. "I wonder where our carpet came from?"

"Perhaps some astronauts flew here on it from another star a long time ago and then left it behind..."

I lowered my head from the bed and had a look at the carpet, at its brownish-grey pattern and frayed edges. Here and there brown threads of its warp were showing through its worn pile. But there was nothing out of the ordinary about the threads or the carpet...

"Look here, Vitalka, stop talking nonsense. If it was from another planet, it would be in better shape. Do you think they're fools? They'd have made seats and port-holes and a cockpit..."

"But perhaps they don't need them. Perhaps they don't have seats on their planet!"

"Well, all right. But where's the piece of equipment making it antigravitational? Do you reckon they made it out of wool?"

"Yes, that's a real mystery," said Vitalka gloomily. "It's something new for science... And in that case we ought to inform the Academy of Sciences about it so that they can study it and come up with the answer."

I had not thought of that! But Vitalka was right: we ought to write to the Academy or else it might turn out that we had been hiding an important scientific discovery.

"But that will be the last we see of our carpet! They'll take it away," I said sadly.

Vitalka sighed.

"But perhaps there's nothing scientific about it?" I said unsurely. "It's just an ordinary magic carpet..."

Vitalka sighed again.

But sighing got us nowhere.

And then I had an idea.

"Vitalka! It'll be tested scientifically, won't it? Scientists will have to discover how it flies, won't they?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Well, and who's going to test it?"

"Why ... test pilots."

"Test pilots know how to fly planes, but they've never flown carpets before. And we have!" I said triumphantly. "They won't be able to cope because they're used to all those levers and pedals!"

Vitalka propped himself up on his elbow and gazed at me admiringly.

"It means, we should carry out the tests! After all, we discovered it so we should do it! And when we've done a thorough job, we'll tell them all about it!"

Vitalka even jumped up.

"That's right! First we've got to learn everything about it! And learn to fly it well, too. Then they'll perhaps let us do some more tests while they're studying it!"

These thoughts made us feel less guilty. We decided to spend the summer testing out the magic carpet and inform the Academy about it in the autumn.

While we were arguing and making plans, the windows grew slightly darker and downstairs Auntie Valya's cuckoo cried out eleven times.

We waited another half-hour and then very carefully put our trousers and sweat shirts on.

Our south window looked out onto the flat roof of the rear of the house and this roof now became our take-off strip. We spread the carpet on it.

Our first attempt was a flop: the carpet jerked off the roof, slid sideways towards the fence, landed on the springy tops of some burdocks and I rolled off it.

"Why did it do that?" asked Vitalka in a whisper.

"It's your fault," I said angrily. "Where did you want to fly to?"

"Over the fence and down the street."

"Well, and I wanted to circle round the yard first! The carpet's can't tear itself to pieces to please us both at once!"

It was stupid to get angry as we quickly realised: we simply had to work things out beforehand so that the carpet was controlled by one of us at a time.

"You have a go," said Vitalka magnanimously. "You're better at it so far."

We sat down on the carpet again and I imagined us skimming slowly and smoothly along the fence, past the porch and log pile, circling round and gradually gaining altitude...

The carpet raised its edges slightly and gently lifted us higher and higher...

We flew over the fence, across the street and up to the chimneys and then quietly over the vegetable plots.

I sat with one arm round Vitalka's shoulders, holding on tightly. Neither of us said anything. Vitalka was breathing rapidly and his heart was pounding away under his shirt. The carpet sagged softly under us, and we felt as if we were sitting in a soft, silky hammock. I let go of Vitalka's shoulders, and crept towards the edge because I wanted to see what was down below. The edge of the carpet rose slightly and became harder.

"It's protecting us. Isn't that splendid of it," Vitalka said in a whisper.

I sat down very carefully on the edge and dangled my legs. The carpet kept its balance and its edge became quite hard, and supported me springily under my knees.

Vitalka lowered his legs over the other side and repeated, "Isn't that splendid of it!" Then he stroked the carpet and asked, "But what will happen if we sit down next to each other?"

"We'll turn over."

"Let's try carefully."

And he began edging towards me and finally sat down beside me. The carpet continued flying smoothly along, without listing. It obviously was not affected by the normal laws of equilibrium.

Vitalka crawled back to the middle, stood on all fours, kneeled and, finally, stood upright calling cheerfully to me, "It's fine. Get up."

I crept towards him, grabbed hold of his sweat-shirt and straightened my (slightly trembling) knees.

The carpet sank gently under our bare feet, but we had no problem standing as we were flying smoothly along in a straight line.

Suddenly it dawned on me that the carpet was flying all by itself! I had stopped controlling it a long time ago. So it could fly on its own? And you only had to show it which way to go?

But what if the carpet had simply lured us away and was now taking us off to a magic kingdom far beyond the dark wooded horizon? I immediately decided to turn round. And the carpet instantly obeyed.

"How clever you are!" I said affectionately, and joyfully seized hold of Vitalka's shoulders again.

We flew so close to a dark fir in someone's yard that one of its shaggy branches grazed me across the shoulder. A cat sitting by a chimney pot on a steep iron roof heard the rustling sound and, catching sight of us, arched its back and spat. And a dog down below started barking, but we had already flown by.

Thrilled to feel safe, I put on speed, and we started rising steeply over the town.

The oncoming wind whistled and beat against our chests and swept back our hair. We swayed slightly but then stood firm again, holding onto each other. All around, above and below, we were surrounded by emptiness but we did not feel frightened. All at once we had firm faith in our carpet. It was our friend and would not let us down.

We sped through alternating layers of hot and chilly night air. At times it felt as though we were flying through warm cottonwool and at others, along a draughty corridor. And at others still we seemed to be wading waist-high through warm water, while our elbows and necks covered in gooseflesh from the cold.

Down below loomed the town studded with little shining squares of windows and tiny bead-like lamps strung along its main streets.

On three sides the town was enclosed by a wide river, which reflected the silvery sky and yellow dawn glowing above the northern horizon.

It suddenly occurred to me that from the earth we now looked no bigger than a postal stamp, but all the same...

"What if we're spotted?" I whispered. "The sky is so light."

"Who will spot us?" replied Vitalka. "The streets are empty."

"Not completely, you know..."

"Well, so what if we are," said Vitalka in a carefree tone. "They'll think it's a flying saucer."

"But there's no such thing as a square saucer."

"There isn't here but why not on Mars?"

We both burst out laughing. The carpet was sweeping us up into the light sky towards the two brightest stars, twinkling together like liquid lights.

Chapter Five

I woke up smiling but feeling sad: smiling because all night I had had a wonderful dream about a magic carpet and sad because it was over.

I simply had to tell Vitalka before I forgot the dream.

Vitalka was snuffling quietly with his face to the wall. A fluffy sunbeam was lying on the back of his shaggy head.

I screwed my pillow into a tight ball, raised it over my head, took aim and, to be quite sure, rested my left hand against the floor. My palm touched something amazingly soft and silky. I started and dropped the pillow, which fell onto the greyish-brown woollen carpet.

The carpet was spread on the floor between our beds!

With a palpitating heart I crawled down onto it and wished I was rising to the ceiling.

And the next moment I was!

Then I carefully landed again.

So my dream wasn't over, after all? No, I could not possibly be dreaming now!

There was the tattered corner of Vitalka's old blanket. There was the flaky skin, peeling like bits of cigarette paper off Vitalka's sunburnt shoulders. There was a little black beetle with a fleck of sunlight on its round back scurrying across the wall. Could you really see everything in such detail in a dream?

I lay down, pressed my cheek against the carpet and started looking up. Then I stared at Vitalka and tried to get him to wake up but it did not work.

So I yelled, "Get up! It's not a dream! Do you hear? It's not a dream!"

Why, oh why, had we been given so much joy? We were so thrilled, we felt like hugging everyone in the world and wanted to do nothing but good, and be good ourselves.

We frightened Auntie Valya again by going downstairs as quietly as mice and then voluntarily washing our necks and ears (with soap!).

After breakfast we took a large tin can and set off to buy some kerosene. Auntie Valya had been telling us to do it for a whole week.

After bringing the kerosene back, we dashed over to my house and helped mother with her weekend chores. She, too, was rather startled at first and then announced that my friendship with Vitalka was having an ennobling effect on me. I started giggling and poked Vitalka in the ribs. Then he sat astride me and a tin tub fell off the wall onto us and mother chased us outside.

The day had only just begun but we already knew it was going to be marvellous. We no longer needed to urge the time to pass quickly because, sooner or later, the evening was sure to arrive and we would again set off on a flight!

We would spend the day swimming, playing football, watching cartoons on TV, flying paper birds from the roof and racing along the grassy lanes with the other lads, playing at scouts. Life was wonderful!

We decided to start off by running down to the river for a dip.

And so off we ran and bumped into Vetka on a corner. She was

in the same form as I, only in a parallel class. She was small and thin with short mousy hair that was completely straight — nothing special, in other words. She often danced in our school concerts. I wasn't at all interested in dancing, just as I wasn't in girls but Vitalka liked her and had told me so on more than one occasion.

"What *do* you see in her?" I would ask. "She's not even pretty. She's got a stubby nose and a mouth like a frog's."

"You silly goon! So what if she's not pretty?"

Oh well, what did I care!

Vetka was walking along with a large checked bag bumping against her knees, and the tufty stalks of some spring onions sticking out of her bag like green tails. She was staring at her toes. If I had been by myself, I would simply have muttered "hello" or passed by without saying anything for, after all, we hardly knew each other. But Vitalka glanced quickly into her face and said, "What's wrong?"

Vetka stopped and looked up. Her cheeks were stained with tears.

"What's the matter, Vetka?" Vitalka asked again as if he knew her well, although she probably did not even know his name.

Yes, and he was right to. If a person's face is tear-stained, what difference does it make if he knows your name or not? Two years ago Vitalka and I had hardly known each other either, but he had still come to my rescue.

Vetka said in a whisper, "My bicycle's been taken away from me."

"Who by?" we both exclaimed.

"Well, by someone called Razikov."

"What form's he in?" I asked in a business-like manner.

Vetka smiled slightly with her large frog-like mouth and said, "Why no ... he's grown-up ... he's an old man ... he's called Ivan Ivanovich..."

"And who exactly is he?" asked Vitalka angrily.

"Well ... just someone who used to be a fire brigade-leader, but is now retired and is always picking on everyone..."

What on earth was going on in the world? While some people were feeling happy, others were having their bicycles taken away from them by some Ivan Ivanovich Razikov or other! It just wasn't fair, was it?

"Why did he do it?"

"I was riding along the pavement because there was a pot-hole in the road and he started shouting at me: "You hooligan! You're

breaking the Highway Code! A girl too!' Then he grabbed hold of my bicycle and said, 'And I won't give it back until you fetch your parents!'"

"Well, why don't you?" I asked. "Won't they stand up for you?"

"Well, yes, they may, but I'll still get a scolding from Mum because she told me not to cycle to market."

"Well then, come on," said Vitalka sternly. "Who does he think he is!"

Vetka did as she was told and turned round and we set off to see that justice was done.

Vetka walked between us and the stalks of her spring onions kept tickling my leg. I glanced askance at the bag and saw that it was full and rather heavy-looking.

"Come on, let me carry that!"

Vetka looked surprised but did not say no. Gosh, it weighed a ton! I bent right over on one side wondering how on earth she could carry such a weight. At once I began to respect her.

When we reached the corner, Vetka suddenly stopped and said, "There he is ... there's Razikov..."

A tall thin man with a bony skull and gristly face, wearing an old green jacket was mending a bench by a gate.

We squatted on the other side of the fence.

"He'll never listen to reason," Vitalka whispered. "Remember the time we were playing at scouts and he started chasing after Vovka Rybin?"

Didn't I!

Vetka looked at me and then at Vitalka pleadingly.

"Never mind," he said. "We'll think of something. Where's he hidden your bike?"

"He put it by the porch in his yard... You'll never get to it because he's got a huge dog on a chain..."

"Never mind," Vitalka said again. "We'll see you home now to find out where you live and in an hour's time we'll deliver your bike to your door."

"But how?"

"Look," Vitalka said rather grandly. "This is Oleg Lapnikov and I'm Vitaly Gorodetsky. If we promise something, it means, you've nothing to fear."

Vetka lived nearby in a small house with a fence round it in Chelyuskintsi Street. We dragged her bag all the way for her and then ran off home.

I immediately guessed what Vitalka had in mind.

"We'll be spotted," I said as we ran along.

"We'll stick close to the fences so we won't be seen and then fly up once, dive down, grab the bike and whizz off again!"

"But what about the dog? He'll jump up and won't half bite!"

Vitalka stopped running and began striding along.

"Are you scared?" he asked.

"You must be bonkers," I said in an offended tone. "Who's scared? It's just that we've got to think everything out."

"We'll make a lasso out of a rope, throw it over the handlebars and pull the thing up. Then the dog can jump up as much as it likes."

"But it'll bark."

"So what?"

"Its owner's bound to come running."

"Well, what of it?"

"What of it! Why, he'll raise the alarm! And then run off to complain about us."

"Who to?" asked Vitalka gloatingly. "And what will he say? 'Two louts flew up and grabbed the bicycle...' "What were they on?' 'A flying carpet!' And then he'll be told to go along to the hospital for a check-up!"

I burst out laughing. Yes, who indeed would believe him?

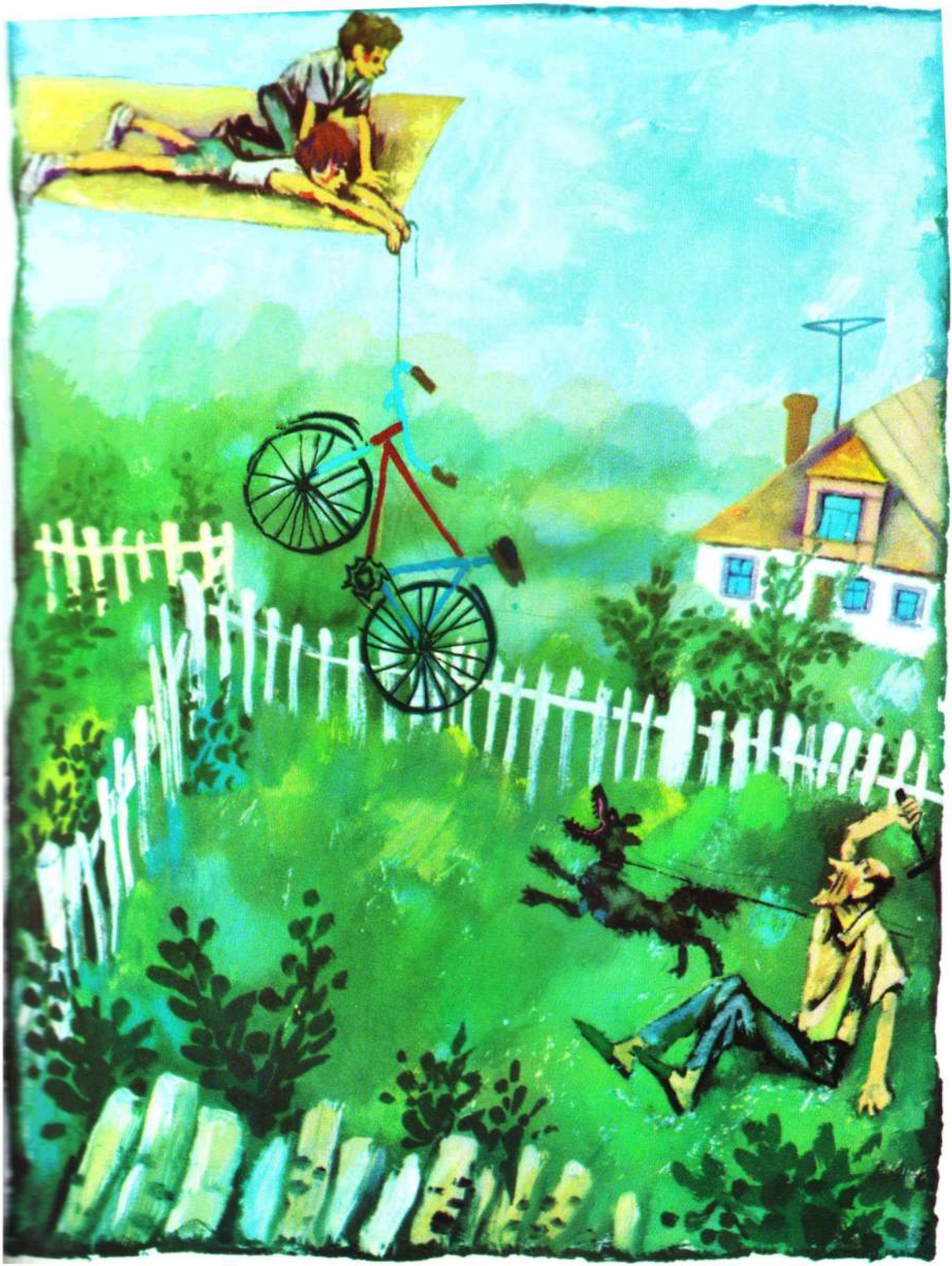
Among the various bits and pieces in our watch-tower we had a clothes line, which we now fished out and tied a loop at one end. Then we carried the carpet onto the roof and laid it out.

"I'll pilot it. I know how," whispered Vitalka.

"Right then."

We swooped down into the yard, hopped over the hedge into the neighbours' vegetable garden and skimmed over the black-currant bushes. After glancing round and checking if the coast was clear, we slipped into the shadows and "hopped" over another hedge. After making sure there was nobody in the next lane either, we swept down its long fence so close to the ground that the grass rustled underneath us.

And then we flew across some more yards and vegetable plots, sticking close to the shadowy fences and rustling bushes.



Here and there women were working on their vegetable-beds but they did not look round. And only once a little boy called out joyfully, "Mummy, look!"

But we, of course, did not wait around for his mother to do so.

Razikov's house stood in the middle of a spacious yard. Stretched between the porch and the gate was a wire with a chain running over it, and at the other end of the chain sat a huge, ferocious-looking muddy-grey dog.

We slipped into the farthest corner and hid in the shadows of a shed.

Razikov was nowhere to be seen. A blue bicycle was standing by the porch. Vitalka got the rope ready and said, "Let's go!"

We flew up and hovered next to the roof above the bicycle. The carpet's shadow fell directly on the dog. It lifted its head, sat up, silently leapt about three feet in the air, crashed down and let out a gurgling bark.

"Yap, yap," said Vitalka intrepidly and then lowered the loop over the handlebars and pulled. The dog was frantic. I suddenly wondered anxiously if the carpet would hold the extra weight but it did without even wobbling.

Then Razikov came running from the gate, brandishing a hammer.

"Help me," said Vitalka.

I grabbed hold of the rope, too, and we flew slowly over the yard with the bicycle twirling on the rope about a metre off the ground.

Razikov tried to grab one of its wheels but missed. It was only then that he realised something incredible was happening.

"Oh!" he gasped loudly and sat down with his bony legs spread out wide.

We pulled the bicycle up and laid it on the carpet. The old man suddenly squealed with laughter, wagged his finger menacingly and threw his hammer at us.

The hammer dropped down and hit him on the foot and he let out a muffled howl and clutched onto his foot. And that was the last we saw of him before diving into a neighbouring yard and speeding home along the same route.

No sooner had we landed in our yard than Auntie Valya came out onto the porch and asked, "Boys, whatever are you doing with the carpet?"

"We've decided to clean it some more," Vitalka lied quickly and beat the carpet with his palms.

"But where did you get that bicycle from?"

"It belongs to a girl who asked us to mend it."

"That's all well and good," remarked Auntie Valya. "But why put a dirty bicycle on the carpet? Especially as you're cleaning it..."

After taking the carpet back to our watch-tower, we fiddled about with the bike for a while for form's sake and then wheeled it outside the gate. Vitalka got onto the saddle and I sat in front of him on the frame. Three minutes later we rolled up at Vetka's house.

We called out her name and she opened a window and jumped out into the front garden.

At the sight of the bicycle she gasped. Her green eyes began sparkling with joy and her face lit up in a lovely smile. Why was it I had thought her mouth was like a frog's? It wasn't in the slightest.

"How did you do it?" she asked quietly.

Vitalka glanced enquiringly at me and I shrugged my shoulders to show it was up to him.

"You won't tell anyone?" he asked her. "It's a real secret..."

If she had started gushing and making promises, we would certainly have invented something but she simply said, "Of course not! I'm not a chatter-box!"

"All right," Vitalka decided. "Come on."

And then there were three of us.

Chapter Six

When I first started writing this story, I felt an irresistible urge to make something up. For instance, I would describe how Vitalka and I had a row once and how the carpet stopped obeying us. Or I could have even invented how after our row we cut the carpet up so that each of us had his own half. And then, it goes without saying, it would not fly, and we realised we had ruined the best adventure of our childhood because of some stupid quarrel, and, of course, made it up but it was too late...

This would make an instructive ending but it would not be true. Vitalka and I never had rows. Well, at the worst we sometimes

argued a little and called each other all sorts of strange names but you could hardly call that rows, could you?

And we never had a quarrel with Vetka either.

She turned out to be a marvellous pal. She looked ever so quiet and even rather scared but was, in fact, not at all timid and, on the contrary, had a strong character.

...Later that day we showed her the magic carpet and then flew over to fetch her at midnight.

"Oh, I'am so nervous," she said in a hushed voice after jumping out the window.

"There's no need to be scared," Vitalka said reassuringly. "We won't fly high until you've got used to it."

But she said, "I don't mean that. It's just that Mummy might wake up..."

We burst out laughing for it seemed she was more scared of her mother than of flying.

She looked at us in turn, cocking her head on its thin neck like a bird, and then started laughing too...

We flew straight up into the sky from Vetka's front garden. How high we flew! And the rustling air, now ever so warm and now bracing and chilly, rushed past us. And the town, girded by the river, opened up below us again. And on the river were little black ships with twinkling red and green lights. Large ruby-coloured lights were shining on the television transmission tower and yellow ones were gleaming in the streets and in houses whose occupants were still awake.

We came to a standstill, and the air stopped rustling and puckering our shirts, and softly and caressingly enveloped us, warming us up. It was very quiet.

We clasped Vetka's hot hands and she stood up beside us.

"How beautiful the earth is," she said. "And the sky, too. It's even better."

Glowing beyond the river and the dark mists of the wooded horizon to the north was the yellow dawn, and higher up floated a transparent cloud, and slightly to one side, scarcely visible, was the silver sickle of the young moon. And higher still in the indigo grey sky were two blazing white stars.

We drifted very slowly north.

"I've been learning a dance called 'The Little Star' for a

concert," Vetka suddenly said in a whisper. "Do you know why I thought of it? Because of these stars."

"Well, dance then," said Vitalka seriously. "With a name like that, the dance is meant for the sky."

She never tried being coy and making excuses as girls usually do, and only said, "But how can I without music?"

"Well, just think of it and imagine it's playing," I advised.

"I can but what about you?"

"We'll do it, too."

"Well... but are you really serious? You won't laugh?"

"Of course not!" said Vitalka.

We moved right back to the edge of the carpet and Vetka stood on the other edge which at once rose solicitously.

Of course, not being used to such an altitude, she felt scared. She had been all right as long as we held her hands but now she found herself alone with nothing but stars and sky all around... However, she was a brave girl and, perhaps, really imagined she was a star or thought it was all a dream and in dreams you sometimes get over your fear of heights.

At first she stood hugging her shoulders and then flung out her arms and began spinning round. I don't know whether she danced well and I simply could not imagine what the music was like. She wore a yellow dress and it looked as if a large shiny butterfly was fluttering over the edge of the flying carpet...

Well, no matter what she looked like. As long as I live I shall never forget how a girl danced in the glowing sky of a summer night, high above the slumbering earth...

Panting slightly, she sat down beside us.

"You were great," said Vitalka.

And I told her so, too, and you could see she was delighted. When she got her breath back, she said cheerfully, "If I become a ballerina when I grow up, I'll tell everyone how I danced 'The Little Star' in the real sky... Oh," she glanced anxiously at Vitalka and me. "No, I won't, I promise. I just forgot for a moment that it was a secret."

"You can if you like," said Vitalka. "It won't matter then... But are you really going to be a ballerina?"

Vetka's thin shoulders rose slightly.

"I realise that's what almost all girls dream of. Only it's very

hard you know. On stage it seems lovely and easy but it's really a hard slog... Day in day out... I don't know if I'll make it..."

"You will!" said Vitalka.

We went flying every night, sometimes with Vetka and sometimes without. Vetka was frightened her family would find out about her nocturnal adventures. Her father was easy-going and kind but her mother was quick-tempered. It was hard to believe that Vetka was this loud-voiced, red-faced woman's daughter.

We realised Vetka might get into hot water and so did not press her.

You would be wrong to think we simply rode high over the town: we tested our carpet. We would lie face downwards, hold tight to the carpet's front edge and fly faster and faster. Rushing towards us, the air tried to tear our clothes off and knock us off the carpet. Vitalka called this an "earripping speed".

We could not fly like this for long because the wind took away our breath, and our ears really seemed to be about to be ripped off.

One night we got ready for a high-altitude flight, put on our sweaters, ski trousers, and winter hats and flew straight up into the sky from the roof. At first everything seemed just the same as usual except that we kept climbing higher and higher. We were not afraid because we had complete faith in our carpet but, all the same, my heart was faster and faster — perhaps because the air was getting thinner.

I don't know how high we climbed for we had no instruments. From above, the town looked almost the same as it had on previous flights except that the lights of the TV tower had blended with all the other little lights. The horizon became very hazy and began to curve upwards like the edge of an enormous saucer. And as always a thin crescent moon was shining serenely above this misty edge.

It became hard to breathe and the air grew cold and even began smelling of winter. Icy cold forced its way through our sweaters. We stubbornly flew on for a few more minutes and then Vitalka sighed and said, "I've had it... The carpet's fine! It will probably make it to the moon but we won't..."

"If only we could get hold of some space suits ... we'd be able to go into space..." I muttered through chattering teeth.

"Where from?.."

A space-suit isn't like a fancy-dress costume: you can't make it out of cardboard. We were perfectly aware of this.

Well, after all, it wasn't the carpet's fault. It was we who could not fly any higher. Even pilots can only fly so high.

And so we swooped sharply down into the warm air and towards the trees, and the lights in the houses and the kind old earth which we could not live without...

Several times we saw in the sun rise.

The hazy horizon merged with the sky and the flaky clouds along its edges, light grey and greyish-blue, became golden, orange and mauve. Others, on the contrary, grew darker and became deep lilac. Then the sun's crimson edge appeared above the lowest layer of cloud, quickly growing lighter and more dazzling and shooting straight white rays into the middle of the sky. And high up the invisible clouds were at once flooded with sunlight.

And we were soon bathing in sunlight, too.

"Hurrah!" we shouted and Vitalka jumped up and burst into song, making up the words as he went along:

We're flying over the town,
And nobody will ever reach us!
Because we're flying highest of all!
So long live the sun
Because we were the ones
to see it first!
We are the Flying Wanderers
Because we can fly as fast as the wind!
We're already in the sun
while it's still dark in the town!
But here it's already morning!

The town really was still asleep in the twilight of approaching dawn. The rays of sunlight had not yet reached the roofs and even the high belfry was still in shadows.

But we were already in the sun!

Orange on account of the sun's rays and his suntan, Vitalka would stand on the edge of the carpet, waving his arms and singing his song.

It once occurred to me that Vitalka looked like the first perky cockerel to crow at dawn. There was no mockery in this comparison, I was delighted with the thought. With his hair blazing in the sun, Vitalka really did look like a golden cockerel.

"How long can you go on sleeping?" asked Auntie Valya in amazement. "I just can't wake you up!"

No wonder! We had only gone to sleep at dawn.

Even if we flew a short while and got to bed earlier, we still could not drop off straightaway as we were tingling all over with joy of flying. Caressed by the warm wind, each and every one of our skin cells seemed to be electrified. You only had to close your eyes and the vast earth with its little lights, river and dark wooded edges began revolving underneath you again. A cricket would start chirring and it seemed that Vetka was laughing quietly...

During breakfast our heads almost dropped into our plates and Auntie Valya stared at us anxiously. "What's the matter with you?" she would ask.

One day Vitalka shook his head to dislodge some grains of buckwheat from his hair and asked gravely, "Auntie Valya, what would you say if we suddenly got hold of a magic carpet?"

I froze.

Auntie Valya smiled ironically and said, "I would tell you not to forget to clean it. You're terribly sloppy..."

"No, seriously," said Vitalka, ignoring my kicks under the table. "Would you be awfully scared?"

Auntie Valya gazed attentively at Vitalka and then said thoughtfully, "No, I wouldn't. A lot of children have their own magic carpets. The ones, that is, who know how to find them..."

"And did you?"

Auntie Valya chortled, pressed Vitalka's nose with her forefinger and went out the room. Then he turned to me and said, "See! No need to kick me!"

"All the same, I wouldn't tell her yet," I said. "She's talking this way because she doesn't know but if she sees us flying, she'll get ever such a shock."

"Yes, I realise that," agreed Vitalka.

At first we did not dare to fly far away from the town but the distant woods kept enticing us. Then one day we made up our minds to try. So we flew over the river (with our black reflection gliding across it), skimmed over the meadows along the low bank and rose over the tops of the totally black and silent wood. Everything below was impenetrable and quiet but it seemed as though someone large was breathing very gently in his sleep under the branches. The oldest pines and firs loomed over the wood like the towers of a bewitched town, and drifting to the left of us was a yellow half-moon.

Once an owl lashed noiselessly by below us.

At last we caught sight of a clearing among the trees and landed in the grass among the dark trunks and bushes. Vitalka switched on his torch and boldly set off into the unknown. But a second later he shrieked and jumped back onto the carpet. "Imagine coming all this way to be stung by nettles. There're enough nettles in our yard."

How had nettles got here? After all, they usually grew near houses and certainly were not woodland plants.

We shone the torch around and spotted a strange round building among the trees. After flying closer, we saw that it was a tumble-down stage above a wooden dance floor. There was obviously a settlement of summer cottages somewhere nearby and we had got into a corner of an abandoned woodland park.

"So much for exploring the jungle," I said in dismay.

We climbed over the railings and saw that the dance floor was directly on the ground and not raised on a platform as was usually the case. Tufts of grass were sprouting through its rotten planks and a small crimson flower with five indented, black-flecked petals swayed on a thin stalk. Most likely, it was a wild carnation like the ones we used to call "little clocks" because it was said you could tell the time by them but nobody knew exactly how.

We were thrilled to see it because we felt sure it was a mysterious crimson flower out of a fairy-tale and not just an ordinary one. Nothing magic happened, though. We simply flew back to town and tossed the flower through Vetka's window to give her a lovely surprise...

"We must fly in the daytime," said Vitalka. "We can't see anything at night."

"That's true," I agreed. "We might do worse than landing in nettles."

And so we started pondering what we should do.

It would be simplest of all, of course, to fly off to the woods before dawn while the town was still asleep and then explore the woods after sunrise. Nobody would see us there and even if they did, they wouldn't believe their eyes.

But just try disappearing before breakfast! Auntie Valya would tap on the ceiling and hit the roof when she discovered we weren't there!

Vitalka eventually had an idea. He insisted it was possible to fly in the daytime. All we had to do was pick lanes with fewer people in them and fly just above the ground, over the tops of the grass. And if anyone suddenly appeared, we just had to flop into the grass as if we were sitting on the carpet. And if anyone asked questions, we could say we were taking it to the cleaners and had stopped for a rest on the way.

And perhaps they would not even ask. After all, nobody had spotted us as we were flying to rescue Vetka's bicycle.

We decided to risk it. After breakfast we flew off our roof, swooped over the fence and flew along Anchor Street, keeping under the hedges of the front gardens and just above the dandelions growing along the pavements.

And we did actually have to "sit snug" in the grass several times. But passers-by took no notice of us for, after all what was so special about two boys sitting on an old carpet by a gate? Obviously their mother had told them to take it out into the street and clean it but they were just playing about...

Then the street became completely deserted and we grew bolder and flew just above the road towards a crossroads.

The silence was suddenly shattered by a policeman's whistle. We stopped in surprise. Where had the policeman come from?

"Breaking the Code, are we?" he said rather unsurely.

We cringed at first but the policeman was young and not very strict, it seemed. And so Vitalka asked rather cheekily, "In what way? We were going along the right side."

"But have you got a license?"

"What for? This isn't a car!"

"What is it, then?" asked the policeman caustically. "A cart? Where's your horse, then?"

"Well, if it's a car, where're its wheels?" asked Vitalka.

We were hovering a couple of feet above the ground. The policeman glanced underneath the carpet, straightened up and blinked.

"How are you doing it, lads? Huh?" he asked quietly.

"The principle of the air cushion," Vitalka replied promptly.

"And it's ... anti-gravitational," I added.

"Has such a thing already been invented?" asked the policeman with respect. "I thought it was still something out of science fiction... Are you from the Pioneers' club?"

"That's right. From the young technicians' workshop," said Vitalka glibly. "We're trying out a new model."

"Well ... do take more care... And keep off the roadway!"

"Right, we shall!" we called out cheerfully and set off home. And the policeman remained standing on the corner, full of admiration for modern science.

"No, it's better flying high up," said Vitalka. "If we climb a bit higher, we may not be noticed. Grown-ups don't usually look up at the sky much because they're kept so busy by things down on the ground."

"But what about other children?" I asked.

"Well ... they'll think it's something flying ... a kite perhaps!"

"Without a tail?"

"Well, we'll make a tail. That won't take long, will it?"

What a good idea!

We tore an old sack into strips and made a tail like a real kite's, only about fifteen metres long, and sewed it onto the carpet's corners with thick thread.

We were rather scared that the carpet might take offence at being pricked by a thick needle or we might accidentally harm it, and so we sewed the tail on as we flew over the floor because we reckoned that if it disliked our idea, it would land at once. But the carpet stood the operation without even flinching.

Leaving Vitalka on the roof, I flew up until he became as tiny as a cardboard soldier. The strong warm wind coming from beyond the woods caught up the sacking tail and began twirling and flapping it.

It was the first time I had flown so high in a sunny sky. The vast green earth stretched out for thousands of kilometres around and was so lovely and bright that I wanted to take a good look at everything. But tiny Vitalka was dancing about our minute roof and waving his arms to make me come down at once.

So I had no choice but to fly back.

"It's fantastic!" he cried. "It looks just like a kite! Only why were

you sitting on the edge? Kites don't usually have anyone sitting on them, do they?"

We decided to fetch Vetka and then set off on our first big flight in daylight.

But Vetka had cycled over herself and, ringing her bell at the gate, called out, "Did you see that kite in the sky?!"

We roared with laughter. Kite, indeed! What a joke! So it really did look like one.

"What's up with you?" asked Vetka in surprise.

"It's not a kite!" we cried joyfully. "It's not a kite! Got it?"

"What do you mean it's not? Have a look for yourselves. No, not that way! Look, over there!"

We turned round. Sure enough, soaring among the puffy clouds was a brightly-coloured rectangular kite with a thin forked tail.

Chapter Seven

There was nothing special about seeing a kite in the sky because lots of children in the town flew them. And so Vitalka and I weren't surprised. But Vetka said, "Lovely, isn't it? What a beauty!.."

The kite certainly was beautiful. Large and red- and yellow-patterned, it glided smoothly and almost motionlessly in the sky.

But so what? If we had wanted to, we could have made one just as good.

But then Vetka said again, "Let's have a look at who's flying it."

"Why?" asked Vitalka rather jealously.

"Well ... it'd be interesting."

"What difference does it make who it is?"

But then an alarming thought flashed through my mind and I asked, "Listen, what if he saw me taking off? After all, he's looking up at the sky all the time."

Vitalka glanced dazedly at me.

"That's true ... But what can we do?.. Well, never mind! If he saw you, he probably thought it was another kite. But perhaps he didn't because he was looking the other way."

"All the more reason to scout about and find out whether he did or not!"

Scouting was a different proposition. It was a kind of adventure, and Vitalka agreed at once.

"Off we go!" Vetka cried happily and dashed towards her bicycle.

"So that's your game!" said Vitalka. "You'll cycle while we'll run along on foot? No, let's go and look through the telescope in our watch-tower. Come on up!"

After Vetka had climbed up the ladder to the roof, we crawled through the window into our "cabin".

Through the telescope it looked as if the kite was just outside the window. We could even see splashes of paint and spots of glue and little knots in its crisscrossed threads...

"It really is beautiful, isn't it?" said Vetka. "Come on, let me have a look, too."

Next it was Vitalka's turn. He barely glanced at the kite, moved the telescope to one side and down. I realised he was sliding down the thread.

The telescope stopped, moved again and then stopped for good. Vitalka looked through it for a few seconds and then smiling for some reason, said, "There he is ... Don't know him. Look!"

I looked through the lense. I remembered that everything was upside down in it but I still started at first: a fair-haired boy was standing upside down on an inverted roof and staring at the overturned sky. It seemed that any moment now he was going to plunge head-first into the blue abyss. But he remained standing firmly as though his old plimsolls were magnetised to the sloping plank roof.

He was moving his fingers and elbows as he fed out the thread and his lips were moving as though he were murmuring something. He was dressed in a bright-green open shirt. The wind was pressing it against his back and flapping its open ends.

He looked like a little green flag or a small wind-blown tree and was probably about as big as us.

Although old, our telescope was still in fine shape and I could even make out the mole on the strange boy's ear-lobe and a scratch on his cheek. I could not see his eyes, however, as he was standing sideways and his head was turned away from us.

Then all of a sudden he glanced round. Someone must have called to him. He smiled and said something in reply. I thought he had a very nice face but I could not get a good look at it because everything was upside down. And I very much wanted to!

So as I could not turn the picture round, I decided to turn upside down. Leaning on Vitalka's shoulder, I jumped onto the window-sill and bent down over the telescope.

But my head overbalanced and I went crashing to the floor telescope and all, bashing my forehead against the boards so hard that I immediately saw lots of stars.

I sat on the floor shaking my head dazedly.

"Oh," Vetka gasped quietly.

Then I picked up the bronze telescope in silence and pressed it against the bump on my forehead, but Vitalka grabbed it, saying that the bump was not serious, put it back on the window-sill and started looking through it himself.

"Look!" he said (although we couldn't, of course). "He's tied the string to an aerial and is going down..."

"He's probably gone to lunch," said Vetka. "He always has lunch at this time."

I forgot about my bump and Vitalka tore himself away from the telescope and we both asked in unison, "How do you know?"

"Well..." began Vetka, blushing so much that we had to turn away. "Well... I ... I was once going by and I saw ... him flying planes from the roof. And then someone called to him."

Vitalka and I exchanged glances. Once, my foot! She said he *always* had lunch at this time.

It would have taken only a couple of questions to drive Vetka into a tight corner but we simply glanced questioningly at each other again. Although we felt rather sad, we pretended nothing was wrong and Vitalka merely asked, "Well, what's his name?"

"Sanya ... or Sasha. I don't know! I only heard with half an ear."

Vitalka shook his shaggy head and glanced mischievously at me, "Well, let's find out! Let's all get acquainted with this fellow! We'll give him a surprise first and then make friends!"

Vetka was, of course, very keen to get to know him and so was I for I had instantly taken a liking to him. But why give him a surprise? And how?

"While he's sitting at home, let's fly over to the kite and tie a message to its tail," explained Vitalka.

"Oh, yes, let's!" said Vetka joyfully.

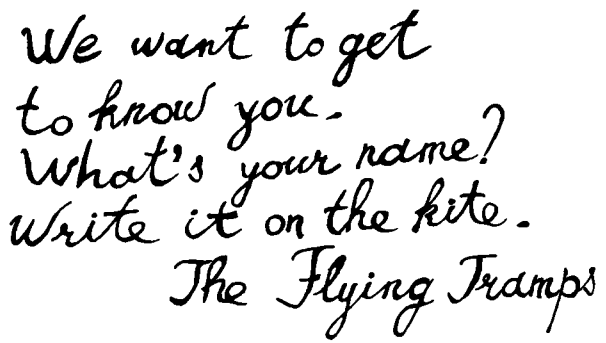
"But what if he spots us?" I asked.

"There you go again!" said Vitalka in annoyance. "If we're al-

ways scared to do things, we'll spend our life sitting in a dark corner."

I shrugged my shoulders. After all, I was only asking. Let him see us, for all I cared. There was no point hiding from a nice person, was there?

We scribbled the following message on half a sheet of paper:



Then we made a bow out of the note with a length of string knolled in the middle rather like the kind you dangle in front of a kitten. We left Vetka to keep an eye on the roof through the telescope, climbed through the window, lay flat on the carpet and soared up into the sunny sky towards the kite.

We had completely forgotten that our flying carpet was also meant to resemble a kite. If anyone had spotted us, they would have been terribly surprised, for kites never fly at such a terrific speed. But we were in a hurry and the only thing that worried us then was that the boy should not come up and see us.

From so high up we could not spot his roof and so had no idea whether he was on it or not. And there wasn't time to examine the ground below. We flew up to the kite. Large, red and yellow, glowing in the sun, it was hanging almost motionlessly in the air with only its tail fluttering gently.

Vitalka seized hold of its wispy end, which was weighted down by some pebbles, and fixed the note to it with a wire hook. The kite angrily jerked its tail away and then hung motionlessly again in the currents of air. We rushed back home.

"Everything's fine!" Vetka called out from behind the telescope. "He hasn't come up yet!"

We waited and about twenty minutes later the boy in the green shirt climbed out onto the roof and sat down beside the aerial to which the string of his kite was attached. We were even angry — was not he going to spot the note? After all the paper bow was blazing like a white spark on the end of the kite's tail.

"That's it!" cried Vitalka in delight, for he happened to be looking through the telescope at the time. I shoved him aside and took a look myself.

The boy was hurriedly winding up the thread.

"The kite's coming down!" Vetka cried excitedly and pushed me away from the lense. "Oh, it's down now... Oh, how huge it is... Oh, he's untying the note..."

"Stop gasping and give us the facts," ordered Vitalka.

"He's reading it... Gosh, he looks surprised! He's glancing round as if looking for us... Oh, he's reading it again... He's looking round again... And now he's climbing down from the roof with his kite..."

"What if he got scared?" asked Vitalka anxiously.

"Oh, whatever next!" replied Vetka in a slightly offended tone.

And I agreed with her. Although I had only seen the boy for a couple of seconds, I was sure that he was not at all the timid type. And now I wanted to get to know him even more.

He was just like us...

"We'll see," said Vitalka.

We kept our eyes out and waited.

Half an hour later the kite rose up again and flew up quickly and smoothly as if it had an engine. We banged our heads together in front of the lense again.

On the kite's red and yellow patterns we spotted some large black letters spelling.

SASHA VETRYAKOV

"Now what?" Vetka asked impatiently. "Are you going to tie another note to the tail?"

After a moment's thought Vitalka replied, "No, we mustn't do the same thing twice... Let's leave him a letter tonight."

"Oh, that's such a long way off," I objected, and Vetka gave me a grateful look.

But Vitalka said, "Well, tomorrow's not so long to wait for. But then it'll be fun."

Then we composed the following message:

If you want to get
to know us come at 12 noon
to the corner of Anchor
and May the First Street.
The Flying Tramps

That night Vitalka and I flew off and found the house belonging to the kite's owner. Then we tied our note to an old ski stick and sent it swishing downwards. It stood upright in the wooden roof next to the aerial.

We were sure the boy would come and when he didn't, we were terribly disappointed, and Vetka especially so. We made our way home in gloomy silence.

Then Vetka cheered up and said, "Why, we're so stupid! Suppose he didn't even go up onto the roof today and hasn't seen the stick? He can't be flying his kite every day!"

Of course! Why hadn't we thought of that before?

We all looked up at the sky to check there was no kite in it.

But there was, only this time it was white with black spots.

We tore off home to our telescope.

The following words stood out on the kite which was almost transparent in the sunlight:

I WANT to but I CAN'T

We exchanged glances, and Vitalka said, "Well, if he can't, we'll go ourselves."

The house was in Timber-Rafters' Street. It was ordinary and old with shutters and lopsided gates bearing the oval tin emblem of an old insurance company. A green flag was fluttering over the house: it was the kite's young owner on roof duty. He did not see us because he was standing with his back to us and looking at the kite.

We stood in a line along the edge of the road with Vetka in between Vitalka and myself and glanced enquiringly at one another, wondering what to do next. For some reason Vetka turned aside and giggled. Then Vitalka said loudly, "Sasha Vetryakov!"

The boy turned round at once and his shirt flaps flew up behind him like green wings.

He smiled slightly at first and then more and more happily and you could tell at once that he was a good fellow.

"Is that you?" he asked and walked right to the edge of the roof and let go of the thread. The kite began somersaulting down.

"Yes, it's us," Vitalka said seriously. "But why did you let go of your kite?"

"Oh, never mind that," he replied. "Now that you're here, nothing else matters... So you're the Flying Tramps?"

We climbed up a rickety ladder standing by the porch, and scrambled onto the roof because Sasha had said he could not come down to the ground.

"Why ever not, Sanya?" asked Vetka as soon as she was on the roof.

She at once started acting as if she knew him well and called him Sanya instead of Sasha. She probably thought it suited him better.

He wrinkled his nose in embarrassment and explained light-heartedly. "It so happened... I cut up a polythene sheet of Granny's, thinking she didn't need it but it then turned out she did need it to cover up vegetable beds on cold nights. Granny didn't even scold me but Mum said I was to stay indoors for three days and go no further than the porch. So that's why I'm living up on the roof. How could I possibly stick it out on the porch?"

Vetka glanced cautiously down and moved away from the edge of the roof.

"But won't we catch it hot from your Mum and Granny? They'll ask us what we think we're going, climbing up onto someone else's roof?"

"Well, first of all, they wouldn't say that and, anyway, they're not at home. They've gone off to my other granny in the country for a couple of days."

"And left you all on your own?" asked Vetka.

"What of it? I'm used to it. In Leningrad I often lived alone."

"But why are you staying indoors if you're alone? After all, they don't know what you're doing," Vitalka asked.

Sanya glanced hesitantly at us as if afraid we might find it funny.

"Well, you see... You see, I sort of gave my word..."

"I see," said Vitalka hurriedly. "I was only asking... And, anyway, it isn't bad up here on the roof."

No, it wasn't bad up on the roof. A warm breeze was blowing over us and the sun was nice and hot. There was a small bench by the chimney-pot on the steep slope. The roof smelt of heated wood and the brick chimney of lime and soot, but strongest of all were the smells of damp sand and warm wormwood carried by the wind from the riverbank.

Sanya sat between me and Vetka and glanced at us in turn. He was probably wondering what to say next.

"Why haven't we seen you around before?" I asked. "We know everyone in the streets round here. Are you from Leningrad?"

Sanya nodded.

He had lived with his parents in Leningrad while they were studying at college. After graduating earlier in the year, they had come to work in our shipyard. But shortly after starting work, Sanya's father had left town again to take part in some races. He was an ace racing driver.

"He spent more time racing than studying in Leningrad, too," said Sanya cheerfully. "Mum says he wrote his diploma work on the saddle of his motorbike..."

As we sat and chatted with him like this, the three of us grew more and more surprised. Vitalka finally leaned forward and gave me a puzzled and impatient look. I got the message and said, "I say, Breezy, why don't you ask how we attached the note to your kite?"

I don't know how this name escaped me. I had secretly called him this the very first time I set eyes on him firstly because his name, Vetryakov, suggested it*, and, secondly, because he was so light and airy,

---

* Vetryakov is a derivative from the Russian word "veter"— wind.— *Tr.*

and an ordinary name like Sasha or Sanya did not suit him at all. And now this name had just slipped out somehow.

Breezy's eyebrows were slightly arched as if he was constantly wondering if we were poking fun at him. And now his eyes opened wide in complete astonishment.

"Why ... why did you call me that?" he asked.

I became embarrassed like a silly little girl and started mumbling some sort of nonsense. Then Sanya smiled and said, "My nickname used to be Windmill at school."

"Well, you certainly don't look like one!" said Vitalka. "Windmills look like this!" He stood up and started waving his arms. "Oleg's name's better."

And so from then on Vitalka and I always called him Breezy.

"And I guessed about your note straightaway," said Breezy. "You must have a model plane with remote control, is that so?"

The three of us exchanged glances and bit our lips so as not to laugh. and Vitalka hurriedly said, "Yes, that's right. With remote control."

"We'll show it to you soon," Vetka promised.

"I've made models, too," said Breezy and sighed. "Only it's no good flying them from the roof because they don't come back. But kites are... You know, people sometimes fly on big kites — I've seen them in films. Have you?"

"We've seen stranger things..." I began saying proudly but catching Vitalka's disapproving stare, stopped in mid-sentence. He thought I was boasting.

Breezy picked a flat chip off the roof, tossed it up in the air and watched the wind twirling it. "I think..." he said gingerly, "if you built a large model ... I mean, a really large one, about five metres long, you could probably fly it just like a plane, couldn't you?"

"Then it would be a plane and not a model," I said.

"Planes are hard to build but you can make models — even large ones — quite easily... And then you can build on a seat and a control panel..."

He screwed up his eyes slightly and staring ahead, drew up his legs, put his feet up on the bench and placed his clenched fists on his bent-up knees as if clutching onto the steering-wheel of a plane...

We understood him very well because each of us dreamed of becoming someone when he grew up: Vetka wanted to be a ballet dancer, Vitalka an artist and I a sailor or better still, a sea captain. And Breezy wanted to fly planes.

Then it occurred to me that each of my friends was trying to see his dream come true! Vetka was taking dancing lessons, Vitalka was drawing pictures and Breezy was making models. Only I was loafing about and did not even know how to be a sailor. I kept putting things off but not any more! That very next day I would start doing exercises and learn all about knots.

I was distracted from these unhappy thoughts by Breezy who started telling us how last year he had joined the young pilots' group at the regional Young Pioneers' club.

"I'd heard that everything there was real... Well, they certainly do have proper suits for high-altitude flights. And they've built a cockpit, just like in a real plane. But all the work's done on the ground and they don't let anybody fly, not even the older boys."

"Children aren't allowed to fly planes," said Vitalka.

"Why not?" demanded Breezy. "A boy can pilot a plane! Remember the film 'The Last Inch'?"

Of course we did! *We'd seen it three times. It was about a young lad like us, a pilot's son who flew a plane when his Dad got wounded* fighting sharks in the sea. But it was only a film...

"I've seen it three times, too," said Breezy. "And I could see it another hundred times..."

"Well then, let's," suggested Vetka. "It's on at the outdoor cinema this evening. It just so happens Mum's working in the second shift today so I'm free."

"We won't be let in to the evening showing," I said.

Vetka gave me an angry glance and tapped her forehead with her finger.

"It's not indoors, you know. And there're birches all around. Nobody'll spot us among the branches."

"I still can't go," said Breezy sadly.

"Yes, you can," said Vetka determinedly. "What were you told not to do? Not to set foot on the ground outside the porch. Well, don't worry, you won't!"

Chapter Eight

He did not believe us at first but who would?!

Even when we had carried the carpet over in a roll and laid it among the dandelions growing thickly in the yard, he smiled in a comprehending and slightly guilty way as if to say: "I can see you're joking and want to cheer me up but why go to so much trouble? Fancy dragging over a carpet..."

"Sit down," said Vitalka.

Smiling awkwardly, Breezy stepped off the porch and onto the carpet and sat down.

"Don't be afraid," I warned.

We rose about half a metre and flew low over the ground, sweeping up a whirlwind of dandelion seeds behind us. Breezy did not cry out to jump off the carpet: he simply opened his eyes wide and gripped my elbow tightly.

It was a wonderful day, a real red-letter day. We had a new friend! And everything in the world — the grass, the sun, the puffy clouds and rustling rowan bushes — everything seemed to be rejoicing with us. We flew over the spacious yard, making sharp turns and several times soared off the roof into the sky pierced with blazing sunrays. The carpet carried all four of us without a murmur.

The only thing that upset us slightly was that Breezy could not control the magic carpet. Vetka had not learnt to either but she did not mind in the least about it. Breezy, however, was really upset. He tried again and again to make it fly properly, but it either slid sideways under the fence or rose very slightly and then flopped down again.

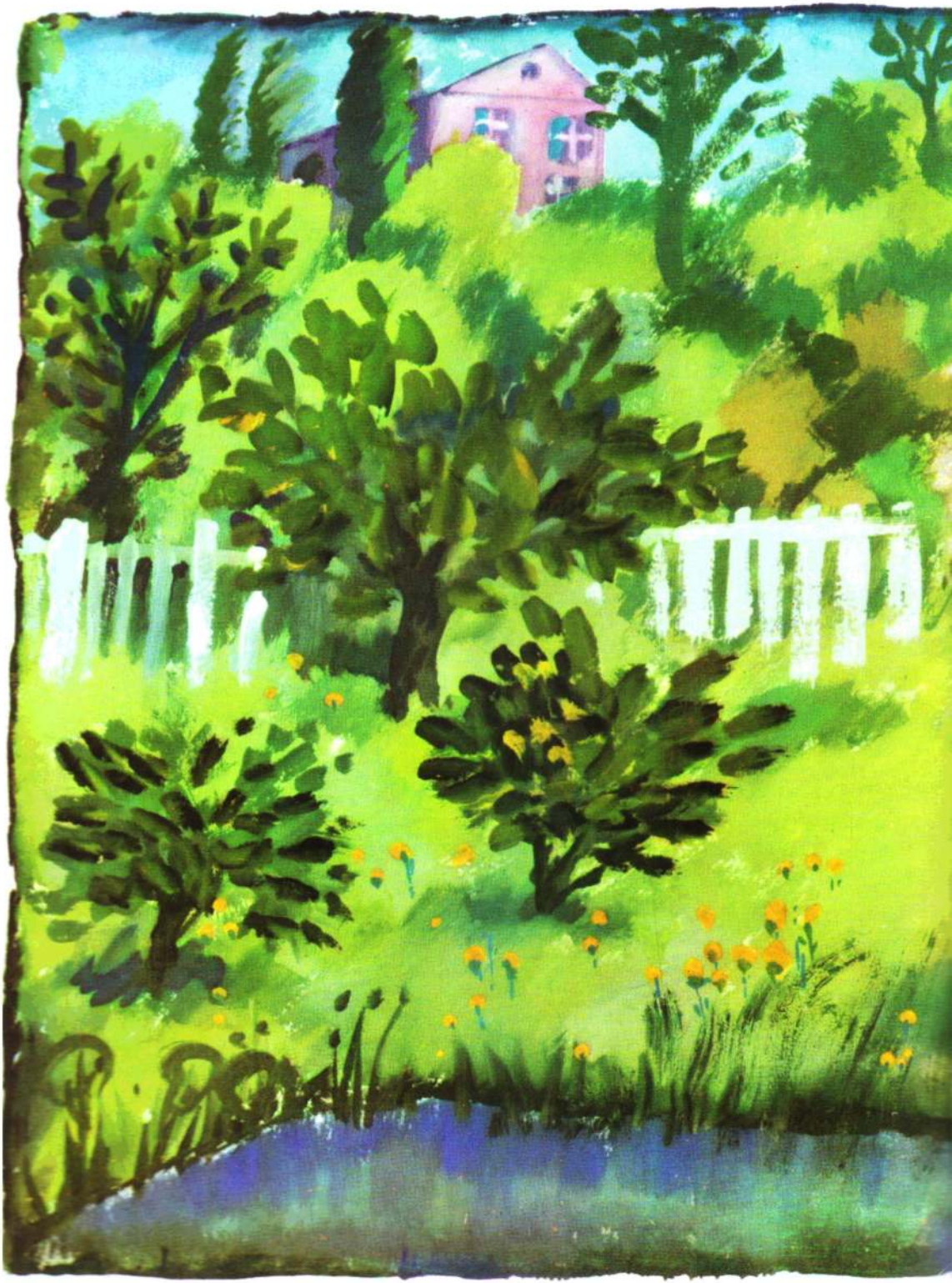
"Never mind," Vitalka and I consoled him. "You'll get used to it and learn."

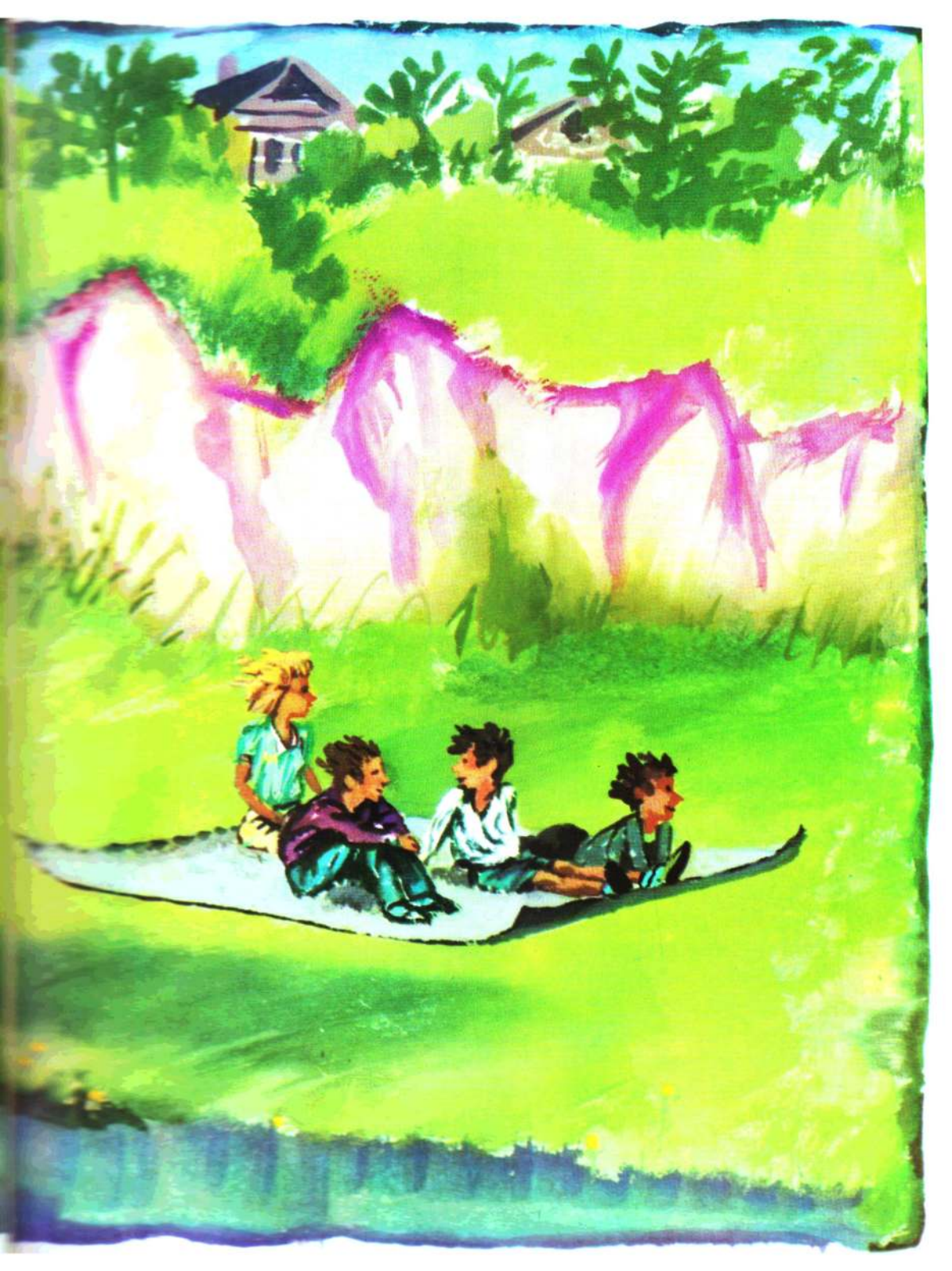
"Yes, I will."

When we grew tired of flying, we settled on the roof again and started talking about life and planes and ships, paper soldiers and Australian kangaroos, stamps and atomic energy, school and Sputniks...

Then the light evening came.

This may sound splendid but, you see, we wanted it to be dark because *we had to get all the* way to the town's park and get settled in the thick birch tops where we would have an excellent view of the screen.





We weren't worried we would discover other spectators among the branches because the birches' trunks were straight and smooth and impossible to climb up.

"It's time," said Vitalka.

We sat down on the carpet. Vetka carefully checked to see Breezy jumped straight off the steps and onto the carpet as he had done in the afternoon and did not break his promise by accidentally stepping on the ground.

We had to fly low over the ground, picking quiet lanes as we went. We had rolled the tail up and put it on top so that it did not get caught in the weeds. Several times, at the sight of passers-by, we landed and pretended to be simply playing. The passers-by shrugged their shoulders and wondered what sort of a game children could be playing on a carpet in the middle of the street. At long last we flew deftly up onto the roof of a three-storeyed house across the street from the park. When the coast was clear, we swept like the wind over the street and the iron railings, over bushes and flower-beds and ploughed our way into the middle of the birches.

It was like being in a green hut. Although you couldn't see the ground through the branches, the light sky was peeping through the leaves above. Several branches were covering the screen and so we edged forwards slightly, broke off a couple and that did the trick. The film began...

Once again a little plane was swaying over the yellow sands and deep-blue sea. Once again the azure depths of the sea with its bright shoals of tropical fish and ominous, shadowy sharks splashed across the screen. Once again ten-year-old Davy, straining himself to the utmost, dragged his wounded father over to the plane while a plaintive song about being all alone in the world rang over the impassive sands.

The boy was our close friend. We were with him heart and soul, and his every step made us either happy or sad. We knew every sequence by heart but still felt thrilled when he lifted the plane into the air.

We did not notice it get dark, indeed, much darker than it usually was even late at night in summer. Then all of a sudden I shuddered because a raindrop had plopped onto my neck like a cold grape, and was rolling down the back of my collar.

The rain suddenly came pouring down, crashing through the leaves and branches and beating down on our shoulders and backs, and on the carpet.

Glassy threads of rain shone like silver in the projector's light. Then a commotion broke out in the audience and the screen went black.

Vitalka was the first to sense trouble.

"Let's go!" he exclaimed and we tore out of the wet branches and sped at an angle over the street, barely clearing the fences.

"Higher! We must fly higher!" I yelled, thinking that Vitalka was keeping close to the ground on purpose.

But it was the rain keeping us down. The drenched carpet grew heavier and heavier until it finally flopped down onto the wet granite flagstones in a yard.

"We're landed," I said in despair. "Now what are we going to do?"

"We can go the rest of the way on foot," said Vetka. "We are soaked as it is."

Did she really think I was worried about getting wet? I could not have cared less about the rain! All I was thinking about was what was going to happen to the carpet. Suppose it never flew again? It was such an appalling thought that I did not even dare utter it aloud.

The carpet looked limp and lifeless. Everyone except Breezy stepped off it and stood on the stone flags.

"You can't," said Vetka sternly. "You promised, don't forget."

"But what shall I do?" he asked.

"He promised," Vetka repeated, staring exactingly at Vitalka and myself.

With a sigh Vitalka offered Breezy his back with his shirt sticking to it.

"Get on."

"Oh no, I can't..." said Breezy sadly. "Really I..."

"Get on," repeated Vitalka. "We'll carry you home. After all, it's our fault you've got into this mess."

"No, it's my own fault."

"Get on," I said.

A few moments later Breezy was riding along on Vitalka's back while Vetka and I carried the roll of carpet on our shoulders. It was terribly heavy because of all the water it had absorbed. But it wasn't

really so much the weight that was getting me down as the thought that the carpet might not fly again.

Every now and then Breezy demanded to be put down but, Vitalka would tell him to stay put.

The rain stopped. In the distance thunder rolled over the roof-tops, as we silently splashed along the wet pavements all the way back to Vetka's house. Then Vetka got out her bicycle, told Breezy to get on the back seat and said she would take him right to his porch while we dragged the carpet home.

"Will you come tomorrow?" Breezy asked hastily.

"Yes," I promised, and it then occurred to me that even if the carpet did not fly again, we had still been blessed with a wonderful new friend.

Chapter Nine

How nerve-racking the next day was! The carpet lay on the roof in the sunshine and the steam rising from it smelled like mists in a tropical forest (or, at least, that's what it reminded us of). It dried out very slowly and when we tried flying on it, it did not budge an inch.

Gazing at me with wistful eyes, Vitalka asked, "Has it really had it?"

I just shrugged my shoulders. To tell the truth, I was choking back my tears, but I said courageously: "Its magic is so strong, a few drops of rain can't possibly do it any harm!"

Vetka came by and tenderly stroked the carpet's damp coat. We called on Breezy several times, and each time he called down from the roof, "Well?"

"It's still not dry. We'll just have to wait," we would cheerfully reply. "Perhaps it'll be dry by the evening."

But that evening the carpet still refused to fly.

But the next morning held a wonderful surprise in store for us. Vitalka and I woke up at exactly the same time, dashed towards the window and climbed onto the roof. The carpet was once again light, silky, soft and ready to fly. In fact, lying there it looked as if it had been just waiting for us!

We flopped onto its caressingly warm coat and flew up into the sky. It was still early, and the cockerels were crowing joyfully in the yards.

Later that day Breezy's mother returned home in a cheerful mood and was not at all angry with him.

"You poor little mite! Have you been sitting on the roof all this time?" she exclaimed hearing that Breezy had stayed under house arrest all these days. "I quite forgot to tell you you were free to go! Don't be angry with me, darling, I won't do it again!"

And so Breezy at once asked permission to go over to our place and spend the night there.

We showed him our cardboard soldiers, Vitalka's paintings, our weapons, telescope and all our other treasures. We put on a show battle of our armies which lasted until the evening. And late that night we stole Vetka away from home and set off flying. And we felt as happy as we had done the very first time because we were now discovering the sky, the town at night, the twinkling evening stars and streaming warm air all over again together with Breezy.

At that time nothing marred our happiness and friendship. Nothing, that is except Breezy's unsuccessful attempts to fly the carpet which made him feel angry and us rather guilty. You see, our carpet wouldn't obey him.

"I can't," he would say unhappily. "Somehow I don't believe that it's going to take off. Now if only it had a steering-wheel..."

We understood what he meant. All his life he had dreamed of planes and imagined himself holding control levers, and he could not think of a flight in any other way.

But we couldn't attach a steering-wheel to our carpet.

"But I'll learn!" Breezy kept assuring us. "I will, honest! And does it matter who pilots the carpet? We fly on it all together, don't we?"

"Wouldn't it be great to go on a long flight?" said Vitalka.

And we all agreed. Vetka and Breezy did so perhaps without thinking but I really meant it. After all, that's what we had been dreaming about for so long!

We were often lucky that summer, and were certainly so in the matter of our distant flight. One day Auntie Valya received a postcard from an old friend in a nearby town. After going about the whole day with a pensive expression on her face, she asked us if she could rely on us and if we could manage on our own for two days while she went to visit some friends of her youth.

"On our own? Why, we can live at my place. Everything'll be fine, Auntie Valya," I replied, giving Vitalka a meaningful look.

Two whole days! We'd be able to fly far away into the unknown!

We gazed so sincerely at Auntie Valya that she did not suspect any of our wicked plans. I ran home and back again and informed Auntie Valya that Mum said she was not to worry about us. In fact, Mum did not even know Auntie Valya was leaving. She was busy at work in the library from early morning till evening because half of her colleagues were away on holiday.

Next morning we saw off Auntie Valya at the station and then raced over to Breezy's. Vetka and he were fixing a strange contraption of narrow crisscrossed wooden laths covered with polythene film onto a bicycle frame.

"Whatever's that?" I asked in amazement.

Breezy and Vetka looked rather embarrassed.

"Well, they're ... sort of wings," said Breezy. "If you go downhill fast enough, you may take off ... like a plane."

I blinked in surprise. Take off? Why bother with this creaking thing-umajig when we had the magic carpet?

"Why..." I began but stopped because I saw Vitalka looking sadly and sympathetically at Breezy and Vetka or, rather, mainly at Vetka. And for some reason she was blushing and standing with her back towards us, twisting a long curl round her finger. Oh, Vetka, Vetka...

I did not say anything because I realised Breezy and Vetka had found a magic carpet of their own or, rather, were making one. True, it was very clumsy-looking and heavy but what did that matter? They were happy together and had a fairy-tale all of their own.

And so that was that. But I still said, "Auntie Valya's gone away for two days. Why don't we fly to the far woods and spend all day there?"

Breezy raised his honest eyes and it was obvious he did not want to fly there but dared not say no as he was afraid of offending us.

"Or if you'd rather," I said hurriedly. "We'll fly there first on reconnaissance and then all fly there together next time."

He smiled gratefully.

"Right!" he said with relief. "And meanwhile we'll finish this off and then all go together..."

No, we did not hold it against Breezy and Vetka. Only once while he was putting some food for our journey into a string bag did Vitalka say sadly, "So that's that."

And then all of a sudden I pictured Vetka dancing "The Little Star" on the edge of the carpet.

"I do hope they don't break anything when they're trying their thingamy out," I said anxiously.

"They won't have time to," Vitalka replied. "We'll be back by the time they've finished it."

It was our longest and happiest flight. We flew over a vast uninhabited forest and the town gradually disappeared behind the birch and fir tops. It now seemed as if the whole world was covered with thick branchy trees.

What was it like skimming slowly over the tree tops? Well, when you're on a train going along a steep embankment over a forest, the trees drift by below in a somewhat similar way. Stick your head out the window and have a look: if the embankment's steep, it feels rather like you're flying but, of course, it's not really the same.

The train carriage is clanking and jolting along and the oncoming wind reeks of fumes and you can't stop and admire the trees or have a closer look at a squirrel in a dark round hollow or a nest full of funny scrawny-necked fledglings.

We were drifting along in silence and only the trees all around were rustling quietly and evenly. The dry sou'wester sent waves of warm air rolling over us. We were lying flat on the carpet, leaning our heads over the side and peering down into the deep dark forest. It was like green glass with orange spots of sunlight swaying on the grass and bushes. The rosehips were glittering like little lights and the resin on the pine trunks glinted and sparkled.

All of a sudden we caught sight of a bright red fox which spotted us, too, and bolted through trees. It had most likely mistaken the carpet for a huge bird of prey. We chased after it until it dived under a pile of branches and vanished.

Every now and then we dipped down into the shadowy wood and danced like red Indians among the bushes and ferns. Sometimes we made a halt in a clearing densely covered with wild strawberries or an old cutting where bumble-bees were droning like heavy bullets among the high willow-herbs and snap-dragons.

And we also enjoyed stopping above a big tree and carefully tweaking the topmost leaf of a birch or a soft pine sprig as if tickling the pate of a sleeping giant.

The forest's little secrets, the slow flight and warm wind cast a spell on us and caused us to lose all track of time. We had not taken a watch with us but could tell by the sun that it was well past midday.

And our stomachs were clamouring for food.

"Let's fly over and have lunch at that tower," suggested Vitalka. "And then make our way home. We've had enough for the first time."

The large geodesic log tower was looming above the wood about two kilometres away. It did not look at all like our watch-tower but the mere word conjured up a cosy and relaxed atmosphere.

"All right but let's get a move on," I agreed.

We let the carpet fly at top speed. The wind, ceasing at once to be warm, flattened our hair, blocked our ears, shoved its hairy paws inside our shirts and whistled like a gale. It grew chilly, and we were soon covered in goose flesh.

Of course, we had not thought of taking any warm clothes along, so we were obliged to slow down.

"Never mind," said Vitalka. "What's the hurry? Here we are!"

We had intended to land and have lunch on one of the tower's wooden landings but, drawing nearer, we spotted a forest lake encircled by strip of sandy beech nestling among the pines.

We, of course, whooped with joy, skimmed over the sand and rolled off the carpet. The sand was warm, dry and mixed with brittle pine needles and little hedgehog-like cones but we did not mind that at all. The bottom of the lake was hard and flat and its dark clear water was lovely and warm.

We had a dip, ate half of our supplies, dug ourselves into the sand and dozed for a while. Then we had another dip, ate a little more and swam again.

"We ought to be leaving..." said Vitalka reluctantly.

"Mmm," I replied. "Let's have just one more dip."

At last we pulled our clothes onto our wet bodies and flew higher up so that the wind and sun should dry us quickly.

"Look!" shouted Vitalka.

Standing alone in a large clearing not far from the lake was a house with nothing but trees all around.

"Shall we check it out?" asked Vitalka.

So we cautiously flew down very close to the dark humpbacked roof whose rotten planks were covered with velvety green moss.

We could tell at once that nobody had lived there for a long time because untrampled long grass was growing all around its sagging porch.

So far we had come across little forest mysteries, but this abandoned house presented us with a serious one.

So how could we fly off without finding out about it?

Chapter Ten

Unlike an ordinary village hut, the house had big windows, ornamental railings round its porch and carved wooden doors. And as these doors were ajar, we carefully stepped inside.

The entry was empty except for a brown butterfly sitting on a racked dry tub and as soon as we came in, it flew out through the sunny gap in the door. We walked into the kitchen and were confronted by the dark gaping oven of an old-fashioned stove whose upper part was inlaid with green tiles. Some unpainted wooden stools were scattered about in a corner. Sitting on the broad table was a little grey creature, which was gone in a flash through the broken window before we had time to identify it. And all that was left on the table were the shells of some seeds or other.

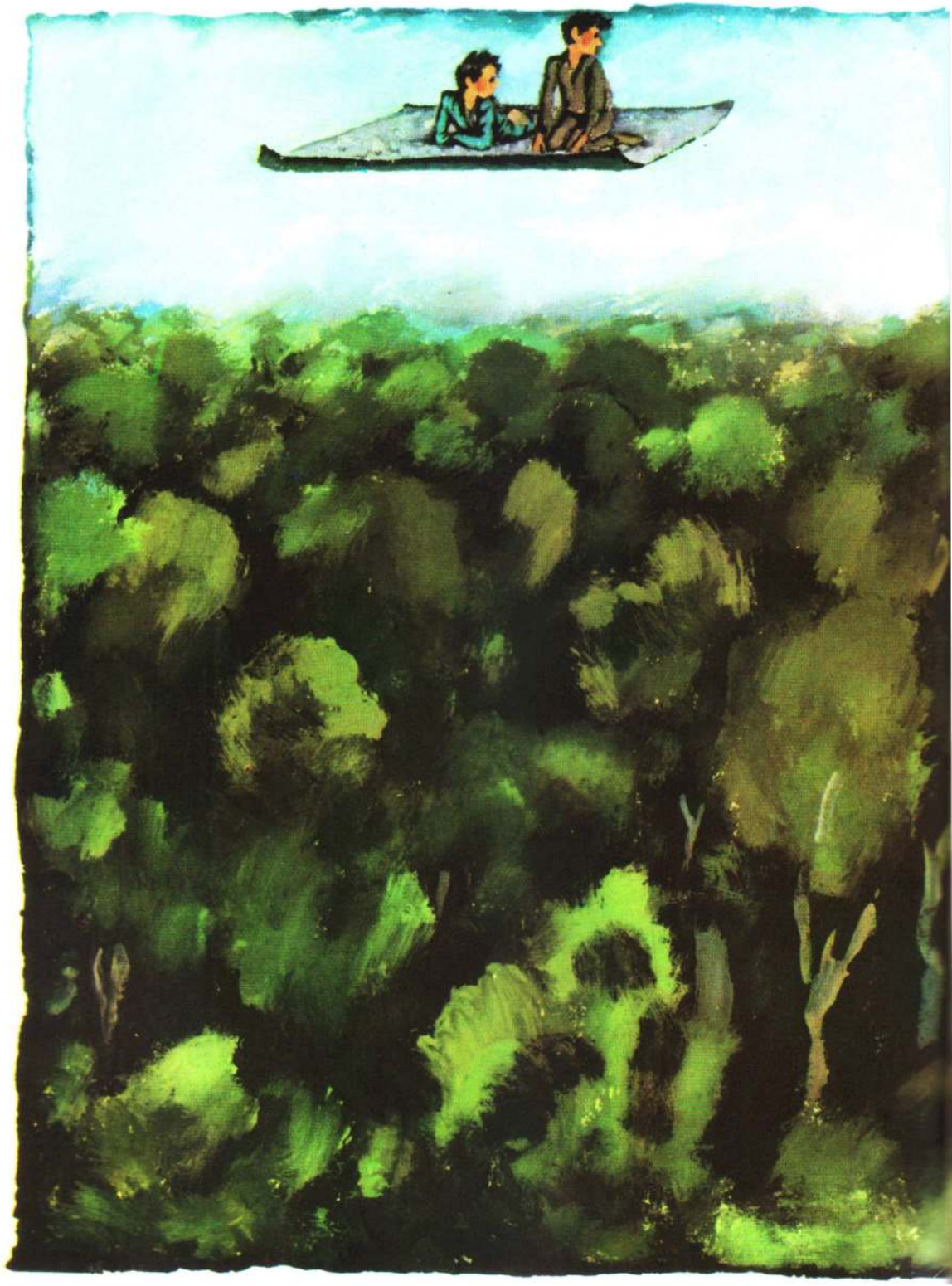
We tiptoed round the two rooms, and the floor-boards sagged gently underfoot. Here and there the remnants of paint still on them glinted in the sunlight. The rooms contained a few pieces of furniture, such as a rusty bedstead, some shoddy chairs, and a book-case with broken glass panels standing about half a metre away from the wall as if someone had tried to carry it out of the house and then given up.

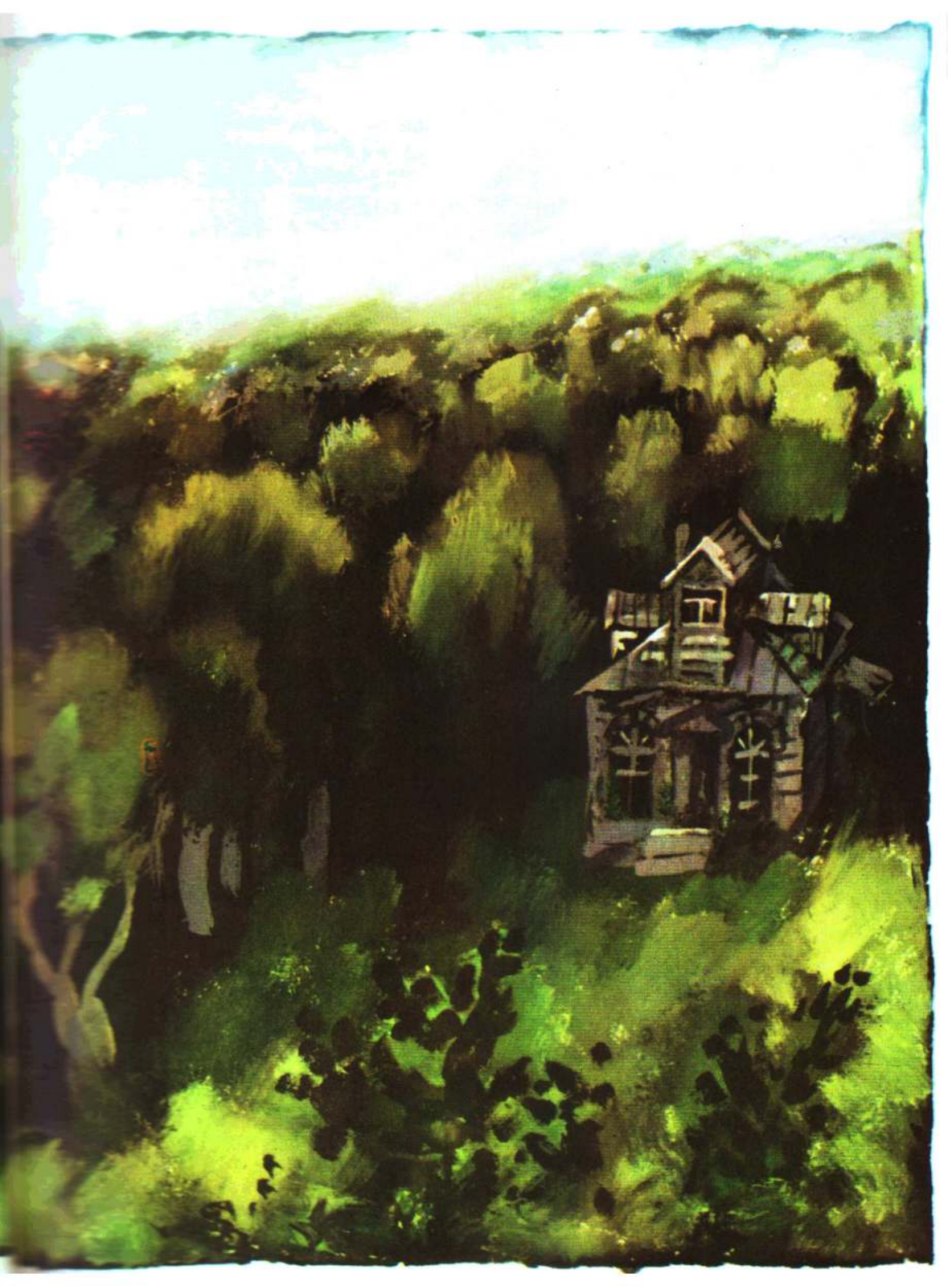
I was just going to look behind the case when all of a sudden there was a loud rumbling sound outside. We both started. The rumbling sound came again, the windows grew darker and the golden spots on the cobweb in a corner vanished.

We rushed out onto the porch. Rolling towards us from behind the trees came a dark-blue stormcloud, which had just swallowed up the sun. Only straight narrow rays were shining out over the shaggy ridge of cloud heading towards us fast.

"The carpet!" I cried.

We quickly rolled up our carpet and dragged it inside. And we were





in the nick of time. Huge drops of rain began pelting the tops of the grass, the porch and the window-panes and then the rain began pouring down. It crashed against the roof and we felt as though we were inside a drum. Then came a pink flash and a bang so loud that we clapped our ears shut and huddled against a wall.

"Now we're caught," whispered Vitalka.

"Perhaps it'll stop soon?" I said not very confidently and sank even lower because there was another, even louder clap of thunder.

It became chilly and draughty. Stinging splashes of rain were flying through the broken panes and the damp wind was forcing its way through the doors which we could not shut because they had sunk on their hinges and become wedged long ago. And, anyway, with such a storm raging outside it was rather frightening to tear yourself away from the wall and go over to the doors.

The storm raged for a long time. In fact, it seemed as if a whole week had passed and not just one thunderstorm but all the thunderstorms in the world had brewed over the old house in order to drench, blind and deafen two little boys...

At last the thunder claps grew quieter and the sound of the rain steadier.

"It's moving away," said Vitalka with a sigh of relief.

But he was wrong. The rain was now quiet and monotonous but it refused to stop.

"What a nuisance!" said Vitalka despondently. "What if it goes on like this for several days?"

It was fearful to contemplate. It would take us at least a week to get home on foot and, anyway, we did not even know the way. Poor Mum and poor Auntie Valya would be imagining the most terrible things! And poor us, of course! We'd get the worst punishment of our lives. And poor magic carpet — it was bound to be taken away from us...

"But perhaps it won't go on for that long. It doesn't sound like the kind that drags on and on," said Vitalka more cheerfully. "Why worry about it now?"

Not wishing to seem dejected, I remarked that we used to only dream of having adventures and now here we were actually having one.

"After all, we were lucky to find the house," said Vitalka. "What would've happened if we'd been caught out in the wood?"

Yes, indeed! The chilly old house seemed more friendly at once. I stared gratefully up at the peeling ceiling and listened to the rain pattering above it.

"We can sleep here tonight," I suggested. "And still get home in time tomorrow, and we've got some bread left..."

It was growing dark outside. Something was groaning and creaking in the corners. It was rather scary and we were chilled to the bone, but at least we were together and our flying-carpet was with us.

We rolled it out along the wall opposite the book-case, lay down on one half and covered ourselves completely with the other. Then we huddled closely to one another in its soft warmth, and, although our feet were in a draught, on the whole, we were fine. And even the rain echoing through the empty house now sounded harmless and soothing.

It was an interesting house. Who could have lived here? Foresters? Hunters? Geologists? Or just someone who enjoyed peace and quiet?

And why and when did they leave? Who knew? Perhaps, a year ago or perhaps long before we were even born...

Vitalka and I whispered about this for a while and then dropped off to sleep.

I do not know why I woke up. Vitalka was breathing warmly on my cheek. The rain had stopped and ragged clouds were speeding over the black trees outside. Every now and then a bright moon bounced out from behind them like a little ball and lit up the room.

There was a strange incomplete silence which was being disturbed by a loud ticking sound.

I prodded Vitalka. He mumbled something, smacked his lips and woke up.

"Listen!" I ordered.

Tick-tock, tick-tock... It was coming from somewhere behind the book-case.

"Raindrops? A cricket? No it's..."

I became scared. I don't know why but I became really scared. And I think Vitalka did, too. But it was even more frightening lying there and not knowing whether it was someone's light footsteps or someone's heart beating...

Vitalka slowly threw back the carpet and got up. And then I did too, shivering in the damp and chilly night air.

Holding hands tightly, we tiptoed towards the book-case. The moon bounced out again and dutifully shone through the window. And as was to be expected in a spooky house the floorboards creaked.

We glanced behind the book-case and saw another door leading into a third room which we had not noticed before.

And it was from that room that the ticking was coming.

Shoulders abreast, we squeezed through the door into a small room with one window, which was dark because the moon was shining on the other side. Vitalka switched on his torch and a yellow disc of light slipped across the wall and fell upon a wall clock.

So that was what was ticking in the silence with its pendulum swinging regularly to and fro!

We clutched onto each other. We couldn't have been more scared even if we had seen a ghost or a robber.

Yes, the clock was working!

The house had been abandoned long ago and was standing empty but the clock was ticking away in the same peaceful and ordinary way as the one in our kitchen at home!

Who lived here? Whose invisible hand had pulled the clock's weight? Who had weighted it down with a large old-fashioned key? (We did the same at home with a pair of broken pliers. You often had to with old clocks).

We probably would not have felt so terrified in the daylight, but this ticking clock in the abandoned house now seemed very eerie indeed. We quietly backed away from it, our shoulders still close together and our shoulder-blades pressed against the wall by the window. Vitalka went on lighting up the clock with his torch as if afraid that something dreadful might happen if he let it slip out of sight.

"Perhaps someone came here before us today?" I asked in an anxious whisper. "And got it going?"

Vitalka's shoulder twitched in annoyance — he obviously disagreed. After all, there were no footprints anywhere in the house or in the grass by the porch.

"Then perhaps..." I began again, not knowing what I was going to say...

Vitalka nudged me with his elbow.

Besides the ticking sound there was also a light patter on the

floorboards as if someone was coming towards our room. Quietly but confidently.

Vitalka switched off his torch and we held our breath and squatted down.

Although my eyes had still not got used to the semi-darkness, I already made out the gap of the open door, the window ledges, the white clock-face, the large cracks in the dull grey wall and then suddenly the outline of the newcomer against it.

It was a wild animal.

It came into the room tapping across the floor with its claws and stopped warily.

Vitalka flicked on his torch, whether on purpose or from fright I do not know and the light wavered about the room and then fell on the animal.

It was a dog. A large ginger dog with long ears! It shook its head and blinked in the light but did not jump back, snarl or bark and then it came up silently and poked its wet nose into my knees.

It was such a pleasant surprise that my fear vanished instantly and I at once felt sure it was a kind dog and that it was pleased to see us. And no longer in the least scared, I hugged its neck, tousled its long ears and, delighted by the happy end to our terrifying adventure, said to it, "What a fright you gave us, doggie, nice dog you."

The dog wagged its tail so hard that we felt a breeze about our legs.

Vitalka asked, "Who are you? Where's your master?"

But it went on wagging its tail, poking its nose into my arm-pit and pressing its shaggy side against me.

Yes, where indeed was its master? He would most likely show up any moment. What would he be like? What if he wasn't as friendly as his dog?

A short loud thud made us start, but it was only the clock's weight which had jerked down several centimetres and was now swinging to and fro with the heavy key just above the floor.

But the dog lifted its head from my arm-pit, pricked its ears and then did something that took our breath away.

It went up to the clock, stood on its hind legs with its front ones propped up against the wall, grabbed the chain between its teeth, and sent the weight and key whirring upwards. Then it jumped down, waved its tail and glanced at us.

"Why, you clever dog!" I said.

"It hasn't got a master," Vitalka said with relief. "They've all gone away and left it all on its own. That's who winds up the clock."

"But why?"

"Who knows? Perhaps it's used to a clock ticking in the house. It's waiting for people to come back and reckons the clock's something very important. Maybe it used to wind it up when there were people about and doesn't want to stop doing so now..."

I felt sorry for the dog and wanted to do something nice for it, to help it in some way.

"Come here, dog," I called. "Have you been ditched?"

It came up again and put its head on my knees. Some fur and tiny feathers were sticking round its mouth.

"It's just wolfed something up," said Vitalka.

I hated to think that such a lovely dog could eat another animal, but Vitalka went on, "Of course, it has. What else can it do? Since it's been abandoned, it's got to feed itself, so it goes out hunting."

Fancy abandoning a dog like this! What sort of people were they?!

"Fancy abandoning a dog!" I said indignantly. "It's probably been living here alone for years waiting..."

"How do we know what happened?" Vitalka argued reasonably, "Perhaps it was nobody's fault..."

But I did not want to think it was nobody's fault. How could it be? The dog had been abandoned and was now living all on its own and endlessly waiting. And it wound the clock up so that the house did not feel completely dead. It was taking care of the house for the people who had forgotten about it. So how come it was nobody's fault?

"Look how thin it is," whispered Vitalka, stroking the dog's back.

We fed it almost all our supplies which it gulped down greedily, glancing guiltily at us as if apologising for not using more restraint.

Then we dragged the carpet into the small room, which now seemed cosier than the others. The clock was ticking away just like the one at home and the master of the house was walking about with us so all our fears vanished.

We wrapped ourselves up in the carpet and the dog lay down at our feet and started breathing evenly.

"Good dog," I said in a loud whisper.

The dog wagged its tail in reply.

"It's happy people have come," said Vitalka.

"Shall we take it with us tomorrow?" I asked.

"Of course."

We talked a little more about the dog, the old house, the people who had once lived here, and made guesses as to why they had left without taking the dog with them and who it was waiting for. Later on we often made up all sorts of stories about this, but we never found out the truth.

I was awoken by the hot sun beating down on the rain-washed window-panes and ricocheting into the room. Golden dots were blazing on Vitalka's eyelashes. He blinked, smiled, threw back the carpet and sat up. I at once felt chilly and sat up, too, hugging my shoulders.

According to the clock ticking away, it was half-past five but we had no idea, of course, if it was keeping time. The dog was still asleep at our feet. Its ginger coat was matted and dirty brown in parts and its ribs were sticking through it.

"It must be awful hungry," Vitalka said pityingly.

The dog opened its eyes and looked at us. It had a sad, kind and very intelligent face.

"Do you want to come with us, dog?" asked Vitalka. "Don't worry, Auntie Valya won't boot you out."

The dog got to its feet slowly and wagged its tail.

"It's saying yes!" exclaimed Vitalka, overjoyed. "Let's go!"

We carried the carpet outside with the dog at our heels. Still damp, the high grass entwined our legs with what seemed like cold fingers. We rolled the carpet out on the porch's dry boards so that it did not get wet, and sat down on it.

"Come here, dog," I called.

It obediently sat down beside us and I put my arms round its neck.

We flew up very slowly and smoothly so as not to frighten the dog and it sat very still, looking down, but did not take fright. However, after we had flown about a hundred yards, it started getting restless, freed its head from my arm, turned round and glanced anxiously at me and Vitalka in turn.

"Don't be scared," I said tenderly.

But the dog wasn't scared: it was asking to go back. It crept to the very edge of the carpet, whined and barked softly.

"It doesn't want to leave," said Vitalka.

"We can't leave it all on its own!" I said angrily.

"That's its home. What can we do if it doesn't want to leave it? It'll come back here even if we take it away."

I realised this myself. It was such a pity to leave the dog behind but what else could we do? So we landed near the house, and the dog jumped off the carpet and looked round as if inviting us to go with it.

"We can't," said Vitalka. "You can't leave and we can't stay. Do you understand?"

The dog looked sad: it understood.

"We'll come and visit you," I promised.

Chapter Eleven

A thunderstorm was again passing over the western part of the sky. Black and lilac clouds were piled up there and every now and then from their midst came flashes of branchy lightning, and then after a long interval a grumbling travel-weary thunderclap reached us.

As the sun was shining, the stormclouds seemed especially gloomy and the lightning dull and hardly noticeable. We weren't afraid to be caught in the storm because an east wind was blowing it out of our way.

Then slanting strips of rain appeared on the stormy horizon and soon it grew lighter there. A large rainbow appeared, its ends straddling the forest like the gates of a giant's palace.

"Let's fly over to it!" yelled Vitalka.

"Yes, let's!" I cried back, trembling with joy and fear that we would not get there in time. But we did! Yes, we flew into a rainbow! I had heard grown-ups say that you could not get near a rainbow because it always ran away from you and then vanished like a mirage.

Well, don't you believe it! Go up to a babbling fountain where there are lots of little rainbows playing in the spray and put your hands into their midst and they will start playing on your palms. So why shouldn't you be able to touch a big rainbow?

Of course, it's hard to catch one up if you're running along the ground but, you see, we were flying with the wind behind us.

As we flew up to the rainbow, we felt as if a silent transparent waterfall was tumbling down on us from the sky. Then everything around, the earth, clouds and we ourselves turned lilac and different shades of blue, and nearby little blue lights began sparkling like glass dust and very gently pricking our skin.

Then everything became gentler and warmer and a green wave rolled over us with bright green lights playing in it like tiny leaves on rain-washed trees trembling in the wind and sunshine.

And then the little leaves became little suns glowing on the carpet's pile and on the minute hairs on our skins and in the air itself. Vitalka was laughing opposite me. His light blue shirt was now bright green and his hair was studded with fiery lights.

The yellow air grew denser and redder and we felt a wave of heat as we flew through the orange mist. And then all of a sudden music seemed to burst forth as the whole wide world was a wonderful festive and bright red studded with little twinkling ruby lights.

We passed right through the rainbow and flew under its shining arc, and then it lured us back, and we swept into it again, diving through different-coloured waves all along its bow. And this took us a long time for the bow seemed to stretch on and on for ever. We bathed in the caressing iridescent light as in a river, and it seemed to be beating its coloured wings before our eyes, each colour with a warmth and even a smell of its own. For instance, the yellow air, if you ask me, smelled of young pine sprigs, the orange of tangerines and the green of damp grass...

It's hard to believe this now, but at the time I was not in the slightest surprised for I was sure that was how it ought to be. You see, at that time I felt the life of the earth and air with every fibre of my being. I was conscious of the way they breathed, rustled, stirred and gave light and warmth. I could feel the fleeting shadow of a passing bird with my shoulder and pick out the right stalk among hundreds of others blindfolded. I knew how each of the four winds smelled and, on waking, could tell whether the rain was warm or cold by its sound. When I waded down a stream, I could count how many warm and cold little currents jabbed my legs. I could keep a sunbeam in my palm for a whole second and when it slipped through my fingers and sat on the back of my hand, I could feel its downy flutter with my skin.

I could tell what sort of clouds were in the sky with my eyes closed. And Vitalka could do all this, too...

We waved good-bye to the rainbow and headed home, flying low between the dark old firs, stroking the tops of the shiny birches and peeping into birds' nests. We invited all the different woodland birds to come nearer, but for some reason they took fright, the silly creatures.

Only a large woodpecker on a dry pine looked fearlessly at us with its black beady eye and then pecked the trunk so fiercely that a whole layer of bark flew off and plunged down into the dark wood below. Vitalka later tried to convince me that the force of this blow had made the woodpecker's red crest slip to the left.

We were flying slowly, but time was simply speeding by, and it was already evening when the town at last drew near.

Among some young birches a little way from the river we caught sight of a round glade covered with ox-eye daisies which seemed particularly large and splendid because they were growing far apart.

"Let's pick some," said Vitalka. "You know how Auntie Valya adores flowers..."

I flew the carpet low over the grass, searching for a place to land where we would not crush a single flower and had already found one when Vitalka called out in fright, "No, don't, it'll get wet!"

The grass was indeed glistening wetly and drops of moisture were nestling in the daisies like in tiny dishes. There had probably been a brief sunny shower here a short while before.

"Stay in the air," I ordered Vitalka and he hovered on the carpet about a metre off the ground while I jumped down into the tangle wet of leaves and stalks. My plimsolls were soon soaked but I picked a large bunch of flowers smelling of warm rain, forest and the rainbow.

On the way home I clasped the flowers to my chest and the front of my shirt soon became wet and plastered with tiny leaves.

We flew up very high from the glade, lowered our "kite's tail" as a disguise and swept over the town. It was sunset, and although the sun was still shining on us, the town was already in shadows. We dived into them very fast and almost fell onto our roof.

13—639

The house was completely still except for the crickets and other insects scraping in the cracks. We went downstairs, got out an antique cut-glass vase and put the bouquet in the centre of the table.

"I only hope it doesn't wilt before tomorrow..." began Vitalka and suddenly stopped in mid-word.

"What's wrong?"

He gulped and pointed to a corner where Auntie Valya's suitcase was standing.

"So she ... um... got back this morning."

"Where is she then?" I asked foolishly.

"Where!" exclaimed Vitalka tearfully. "Why, she's running all over town, looking for us. Where else could she be? Here she is!"

Through the window I caught sight of Auntie Valya walking slowly across the yard from the gate.

We rushed up to our watch-tower, tore off our plimsolls and dived under the blankets. We could hear Auntie Valya's heels clicking on the stairs. My wet footprints had told her that the travellers had returned home.

Half a minute later we were lying completely still with our faces towards the wall, and Auntie Valya was standing in the middle of the room and delivering an unusually long and extremely harsh lecture to our backs.

She said we were impossible, cruel little boys and that we thought only of our own pleasure and never about how grown-ups could get badly ill from worry. It was a good thing at least that Valentina Sergeyevna (my mother) had not heard about our disappearance because she and Uncle Seva were at work all day long (I gave a sigh of relief), but she, Auntie Valya, had aged ten years in that one day. But the really terrible thing was that we were growing up into heartless egoists. Nothing that was said to us had the slightest effect. So there was only one way left of teaching us and that was to get hold of two strong switches, one for each of us, and give us a really good, sound hiding.

Unfortunately, however, she could not do this. She had no right to beat me as I was not her relative although she often forgot this (here she paused slightly and sniffed suspiciously). And it was unfair to beat only Vitalka because we were probably both equally to blame. And so all she could do was to go away and leave us alone with our conscience (if we knew what that was, and if we had any left).

I evidently had because I felt terribly sad and remorseful. I was even ready to accept Auntie Valya as a close relative with all the ensuing consequences. But Auntie Valya blew her nose loudly and after a reproachful silence went downstairs where she saw the bouquet and relented.

"Rascals," she said in a gentler tone. "What rascals..."

We crept downstairs and stopped in the doorway. Auntie Valya raised her face from the bouquet and looked at us over her shoulder. We must have looked very guilty, small, and pathetic.

"You villains," said Auntie Valya. "Where have you been? I got back here at five this morning and guessed at once that you hadn't slept the night here. I tried to get Sasha and Vetka to tell me, but they mumbled something incoherent... I almost died."

"But we didn't know you'd come back earlier," said Vitalka.

Auntie Valya turned to us, sat down firmly in a chair, straightened herself and said in a stringent tone, "Come here, you horrid boys, and tell me all about the tricks you've been up to. I want all the detail and no fibs."

She was no longer angry at all. In fact, she was happy we had come back. We went up to her and she grabbed hold of our hands as if afraid we might run off again. We sighed, exchanged glances and started telling her about the magic carpet.

"After all, it was you who gave it to us," Vitalka whispered in conclusion.

And I added, "And it's quite safe..."

I don't know whether Auntie Valya believed us or not but I think she probably did. She neither seemed surprised nor asked us to show her how we flew but she squeezed our hands and said, "Magic carpets are found in fairy-tales, and fairy-tales are written to make people happy. So how can you make a fairy-tale bring people grief?"

So we promised never to do anything again with the carpet or without it that would bring Auntie Valya grief.

For some reason or other, she smiled, shook her head, looked at us and then at the daisies and then at us again and said that she really ought to teach us a lesson, but unfortunately she could not very well throw away the presents she had brought us.

And then she presented Vitalka with some paints and me with a mouth organ and us both with a compass with a luminescent face, and we let go restrained whoops of joy.

She had also brought Vitalka a blouse with a silk sash and an embroidered pattern on its collar and hem. It was made of some silky light yellow fabric that was glossy like satin.

She told him to try it on at once. It turned out to be rather on the large side and hung baggily on him, making him look a little like a girl in a party frock. I frankly told him as much while Auntie Valya went to fetch her glasses.

"So what? Just as long as she's not angry any more," Vitalka retorted.

He told Auntie Valya that the shirt fitted him perfectly and that he liked it very much and was simply thrilled by her present.

"Really?" she asked joyfully. "Why, that's marvellous. I thought it was rather too wide and long. I'm very pleased you like it. You wear it tomorrow when we go to the circus."

"The circus?!" we both exclaimed in unison.

And then Auntie Valya informed us that she had bought the tickets a week ago but had wanted to keep it a surprise.

Vitalka rushed over to kiss her, and as I was too shy to do the same, I thumped him between the shoulder-blades to show how thrilled I was.

And then he charged at me like a bull and sat astride me. The chandelier started clinking and the cuckoo, scared out of its wits, flopped out fifteen times. And Auntie Valya clutched her head and shrieked, "Stop it this instant! You're mad savages, not children! I'll turn you out the house and you can sleep in the yard until you learn to behave like decent people!"

Charter Twelve

"Are you really going to the circus?" asked Mum in a strange tone.

"Yes... Why?" I asked.

"Just look at your knees."

I looked down out of the corner of my eye and gave a short sigh.

"Exactly!" she said and then added that I would only get out of the house with knees like that over her dead body, especially since I was

going to the circus where there would be a large crowd with quite a few people who knew whose son I was.

When Mum started speaking in that tone to argue was useless.

A minute later I was standing ankle-deep in hot water in a large wash-basin and groaning piteously as Mum scrubbed my knees with a nylon net sponge. Just try and scrub off accumulated layers of street dust, rust from Vitalka's roof, earth from woodland glades, deeply embedded gritty sand and ingrained green grass stains.

Mother soon grew tired and bad-tempered. And then there was the basin! It behaved really rottenly. Its bottom was slightly convex and it kept turning round under me. When mother pressed my left knee, the basin spun to the left, and when she tackled my right one, it immediately spun back again.

"Stop twisting!" mother snapped.

"I'm not, it's the basin..."

"Don't argue!" she said threateningly and pressed so hard with the sponge that I let out a howl like a cat whose tail has been trodden on.

"Maybe I'd better do it myself?" I asked timidly.

"Yourself?!" exclaimed mother. "If you could do anything at all yourself, I'd be the happiest person in the world."

But when she had finally worn herself out, she handed me the sponge and stalked out of the kitchen.

My knees stang as if I had been crawling across a red-hot tin roof. I had to give them a rest and while I was doing so, I decided to see how many times I could spin round in the basin if I gave a strong push.

I grabbed the edge of the table and spun round.

The basin turned half round, slipped from under me, shot like a flying saucer diagonally across the kitchen and crashed into the corner, splashing the walls with water. And I, too went crashing down and struck the floorboards with an almighty thump.

I got a terrible fright. I imagined Mum bursting into the kitchen and giving me a rocket. And the circus would be off, of course. So I started howling in terror and pain.

It was Uncle Seva, who ran in. He grabbed hold of me, pressed me against his uniform jacket and said in a loud whisper, "My poor little Oleg! What happened, laddie?"

He had never spoken like that to me before, or perhaps he had but I had not taken a blind bit of notice. Now, however, I was so terrified,

wet and miserable that I couldn't be huffy especially as at that moment Mum appeared and exclaimed ominously, "I thought as much!"

"Wait, wait," said Uncle Seva. "What did you think? He's banged himself so hard, he's crying. Aren't you sorry for him?"

For several seconds mother stared incredulously at me clinging to Uncle Seva as if he was the only person I had in the world to defend and protect me. Then, pretending to be annoyed, she said, "Sorry my foot! I just wonder why nobody is ever sorry for me?"

She started mopping up the water, declaring that all men were absolutely ridiculous and helpless. And the most amazing thing was that whenever they did anything foolish, they always came to each other's rescue, and there was no way of getting at them!

But I could tell she was really pleased for she was fed up with watching my silent battles against Uncle Seva and now it seemed I was fed up with them, too.

I gazed shyly into Uncle Seva's face through my wet lashes, and he smiled at me and I smiled back.

Then he carried me into the next room, sat down on the sofa and settled me on his knees.

"Did you bang yourself hard?" he asked quietly.

"No ... not very," I whispered.

"Feel better now?"

"Yes..."

A large button with an anchor was digging into my rib, but I did not move away. I felt so good!

Lenka opened her eyes so wide when she caught sight of us that I felt like sticking my tongue out at her. But I didn't, which was a dignified and wise thing to do. Instead I looked up slowly and gazed into Uncle Seva's face, and we both smiled at each other again.

Mum entered the room and began ironing my Sunday suit. Then she examined my knees. All dirt had been scraped off them, and only some scabs remained — but you can't scrub them off, can you?

"Get dressed, cry-baby!"

My suit smelt of a hot iron and joy. It was pale blue and as light as a little silk parachute you can launch from a catapult. And it had gold buttons, which shone like new coins, shoulder-straps, buckles and a little embroidered star on its breast pocket. These suits, which looked like cadet uniforms, were only just coming into fashion at the time, and Mum had brought this one back from Leningrad with some white

knee-length socks, a dark blue cap. Mum also gave me a pair of squeaky new sandals which were so springy you felt you simply had to start running about in them.

The silk tassel of my cap tickling my left brow, I looked cheerfully at mother, Uncle Seva and Lenka, spun round on one foot, waved to them all from the doorway and set off to Vitalka's in the best of moods. And even when two boys on the way called me a show-off, I did not mind.

I thought about Uncle Seva, and felt joy well up in my heart.

And then there was the circus! That was fantastic too!

But life has a way of spoiling things whenever you feel happy.

In the circus entrance the grey-haired old ticket-collector refused to let us in. After turning the tickets over, and looking at the back side, he said to Auntie Valya, "Your tickets are for tomorrow's performance, not today's."

"How's that?" retorted Auntie Valya sternly and indignantly. "Where does it say so?"

"Here! You see this stamp..."

Auntie Valya started pulling at her lace cuffs and saying, "I just don't understand it... It must have been the cashier... But I asked her..."

The old man sighed sympathetically and said, "It can't be helped... There aren't any tickets left now, and the ticket office is closed."

"How disgraceful," said Auntie Valya and looked guiltily at us. We were hanging our heads.

People were pressing on us from behind and someone called out, " 'ere, what's up, love? Don't block the way, we've all got to get in!"

"What's the hurry?" the old man suddenly flew up. "You'll all get in. But they've got to be looked after too."

He looked at us and said, "I can let you in, of course. I understand... The boys have been looking forward to it... The only trouble is you'll have to stand because we're fully booked. The kids'll be all right, but at your age, lady..."

"No, thank you," replied Auntie Valya very drily. "We'll wait till tomorrow. Come along, boys..."

We made our way out of the circus compound and walked home very dismally.

"Never mind," said Auntie Valya hesitatingly. "We'll definitely see it tomorrow."

Tomorrow! But what about today? Everything was going so swimmingly, and then all of a sudden...

Vitalka was walking along, staring at his feet, winding his silk sash round his finger and angrily pulling at it.

I was not feeling so sad, though, for I remembered Uncle Seva and thought about how I would have a good evening at home. So, when we reached our place I told them I would spend the night at home.

But inside another disappointment awaited me: Mum and Uncle Seva had invited Auntie Lyuba, our old neighbour, over to look after Lenka while they went out to the cinema.

Then I thought about how sad Vitalka would be feeling on his own and decided to take *The Snow Queen* along to his house. So that we read it aloud. It was my favourite fairy-tale and Vitalka liked it, too, but we had never read it aloud together before and that would, most likely, be great fun.

I started hunting for the book on the shelf but it wasn't there!

"Lenka!" I said ominously. "Have you taken *The Snow Queen*?"

"Yes..." she stammered.

"Where did you put it?"

"I gave it to a girl to read."

I was so stunned by her cheek that I lost my breath. Lent it to a girl! My *Snow Queen*!

When I got my breath back, I screwed up my eyes and asked, "Do I let boys play with your dolls?"

Lenka began blinking faster, obviously about to burst into tears.

"But Mummy... said we shared all the books."

If it had been the day before, I would have put her right on that score but because of what had happened between Uncle Seva and me, I just gave her a warning, "If she tears it up or loses it..."

"No, she won't," Lenka promised hastily. Grumbling for appearance's sake, I got out *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* which would also be suitable for reading that evening.

"Tell the folks I'm at Vitalka's," I called to Lenka who looked astounded to have been left off the hook so lightly.

Even now as an adult, I often marvel at the changes trifling incidents can work in your life. If we hadn't picked up *Tom Sawyer* that evening probably nothing would have happened.

Everything began quite normally. We settled down on the bed, turned on the bedside lamp, and opened the book, which we had read many times over, in the middle...

"There comes a time in every rightly constructed boy's life when he has a raging desire to go somewhere and dig for hidden treasure..." I read out and stared in amazement at Vitalka and he at me. We were normal boys — why hadn't we ever thought of this before?

Probably because we did not have a magic carpet then. But on the carpet we could get to places where there really just might be buried treasure!

"But where?" I asked.

"In the old house," said Vitalka thoughtfully.

Why, of course! Like in *Tom Sawyer*, the old house was an ideal place! Perhaps its mysterious owners had left some gold coins and guns behind in the cellar when they were leaving? And the dog was guarding them? But the dog knew us, didn't it?!

The only trouble was that it was a long way away, and we felt the itch to go looking soon. Since we had not got to the circus, we could even start that night.

And then Vitalka said in a conspiratorial whisper, "The belfry..."

Of course! Why hadn't we thought of that before? How was it that we had never thought of looking inside the belfry where nobody had set foot for forty whole years?!

Vitalka and I hugged each other in joy and started rolling about and fell off the bed but, fortunately, landed on the carpet.

But once we'd flopped down, I began to have doubts.

"Treasures are usually buried under ground. But we can only get into the top part and not the bottom. So what's the good of that?"

"But the clock's up there. Perhaps we'll find the machine-gunner's skeleton?.."

I shuddered and asked him what the dickens we needed that for!

"Well, you never know... We could take the skull and stick a candle in it so that its eyes blazed and then hang it up outside Razikov's window. Just imagine what a lovely surprise he'd get!"

Yes, I could certainly imagine that! But I was not too keen on the idea of coming face to face with a skeleton in that dark spooky tower.

"Oh, of course there's no skeleton there," Vitalka said to reassure me. "If there was, it would have crumbled apart and its bones would have fallen to the ground by now... But the machine-gun's probably

still there. After all, machine-guns are jolly tough... And there're probably some cartridges left in it too. If we find any, we'll bring them back here and if anyone tries to get in here, we'll let rip at them bang-bang-bang-bang!"

"Who on earth'll try and get in here? And if they do, and you let rip at them just once, you'll get banged yourself ever so hard you know where..."

"I was only joking... It's probably broken anyway. But we can still play with it!"

Of course, playing with a real machine-gun, even a broken one, was just as good as finding treasure! And quite different from a skeleton...

So that was the end of the argument!

We started preparing for our adventure.

From under our beds we dragged out a skein of rope, some torches and our weapons box.

It never occurred to us, of course, to change our clothes. I simply took off my cap so that it didn't get knocked off by the wind and Vitalka pulled off his sash so that it didn't get caught on anything. Just as paratroopers stick their weapons down the tops of their boots, I stuffed mine down my new white socks: a long-barrelled plastic revolver down the left one and a long knife made from a hack-saw blade down the right.

However, Vitalka made me leave the revolver behind, saying we did not need a toy as we were off on a serious expedition. My knife on the other hand, was perfectly all right.

And I knew that myself. Bound with insulating tape, the handle was sticking out impressively just below my knee and the thin blade lay flat against my leg and chilled my skin pleasantly. This sensation gave me confidence and strength to face anything — even a skeleton...

We flew off the roof just before midnight, when Auntie Valya was already sound asleep.

It was the end of July, and the lightest summer nights were already over but it was not really dark yet. The sky was bluish-grey and only the largest stars were visible in the sparkling silvery air. To the east low clouds were shimmering like quicksilver around a dull-pink moon.

We flew just above the wires, avoiding the black firs and pines and spiky television aerials. After a while Vitalka grew bored of flying so low and took the carpet up another hundred metres or so.

A host of little lights began twinkling below us and stretching round the edge of the town was the light river bend with its little black ships. Their little coloured lights seemed to exist quite separately like stars which had fallen there by chance.

And the belfry loomed above the clear water like the tower of a mysterious castle. In the upper tier's semi-circular embrasures we could clearly see the outlines of its bells, which from a distance looked like the little bells hung on fishing-rods.

"Lovely, isn't it?" said Vitalka.

I nodded. But all of a sudden we flew into a strip of freezing cold air and were swiftly brought back to reality. There was nothing for it but to fly down towards the roofs again.

At last the monastery's wall flashed by below, the weather-vane on the pointed peak of its corner tower drifted by and straight ahead was the belfry advancing on us like a giant.

We hovered by its wall about ten metres off the ground. All day long it had been basking in the sun and was now as hot as an oven and smelt of heated bricks, lime and fresh wormwood.

As we rose slowly upwards and the wall slipped down past us, I pressed my palm against it and instantly felt a rough burning sensation on my skin and saw that my palm was covered in chalk. I was just about to rub it off against my trousers when I remembered about my new suit and simply rubbed it against the other palm.

"What are you clapping for?" asked Vitalka. "We haven't found anything yet."

"We will," I said.

And I really was sure we were bound to find something interesting in such a mysterious old tower. Of course, I hoped it wouldn't be a skeleton...

The clock's huge face loomed above us and we stopped dead in the centre, opposite the spindle its mighty hands were attached to. The minute hand was about the same size as me and smelt, just like our telescope, of brass. The iron clock-face smelt of rust.

"How's that for a little alarm-clock!" Vitalka whispered admiringly.

I nodded and flew the carpet up to the face's top edge.

Both hands were pointing up — the minute one at just before twelve and the hour one at one. The gunboat's shell had hit it just before one in the afternoon.

I touched the minute hand's ornate tip. It felt cold. Brass obviously cooled faster than iron.

"What huge numbers!" said Vitalka in the same whisper.

The brass Roman numerals were each the size of a large book. I wanted to touch them, too, but the carpet rose smoothly as Vitalka guided it towards the bells.

We stopped by an arch partitioned off by a railing of metre-high carved pillars and a thick cross-beam. High above the railing hung a dark bell under which Vitalka, Vetka, Breezy and I could have easily hidden.

Only from a distance did the arch look like an ordinary semi-circular window with a little bell inside. Close-up it looked more like some tall gateway. It suddenly occurred to me that if you were to shout out, your voice would carry into the vaults, strike the bell and echo right across the town. For some reason or other this thought made me feel rather weird.

However, while I was pondering this, Vitalka boldly stepped off the carpet and onto the railing and sat astride them.

"Come on," he said. "I'm holding onto the carpet."

So I also climbed onto the railing, which was rough and prickly to the touch. If you did not watch out, you could easily get a splinter in your palm. We pulled the carpet towards us, folded it in half and hung it on the railing.

"Well, here we are," said Vitalka.

He pulled up his shirt, fumbled about, dragged a little torch out of his pocket and switched it on.

"Look, there's a floor!"

I also turned on my torch, which was hanging on a string round my neck.

Yes, sure enough down below us stretched a plank floor. But what a state it was in! It was pitted with dark holes, which had obviously been made by shell splinters, and in the middle there was a large gaping hole with charred beams sticking out of it.

We had heard grown-ups say that the shell had struck the arch's side wall and exploded in the midst of the bells. Two of the smaller bells had been hurled into the monastery's courtyard and one large one which had hung under the dome, had broken free and plunged down to the ground crashing through the flooring. The other bells plaintively droned for a while but stayed put.

After cautiously lighting up all the corners with my torch and making sure there was no sign of a skeleton, I cheered up.

"It certainly made a mess," I said.

"The machine-gunner must have got thrown out by the blast. And his machine-gun, too," replied Vitalka in dismay.

"We could search for treasure," I suggested half-heartedly because I could not imagine where we might find any here.

"Let's have a look round first," said Vitalka.

He bravely dangled his legs over the railing and jumped onto the planks which trembled slightly but without giving way. I followed suit.

Then we rolled up the carpet and laid it on the floor against the wall and had another look round.

There was nothing to search for on the upper landing. Its most interesting feature was its bells. But treasures aren't usually hidden in bells, and we would always be able to examine them properly later.

I crawled on all fours towards the black hole and shone my torch down it, but all was dark and empty.

I felt rather small about Vitalka always doing things first as if I was scared to, and so I boldly said, "Let's have the rope. I'll go down."

But Vitalka replied that it was foolish to go down a hole on a rope when you could go downstairs in a perfectly normal manner.

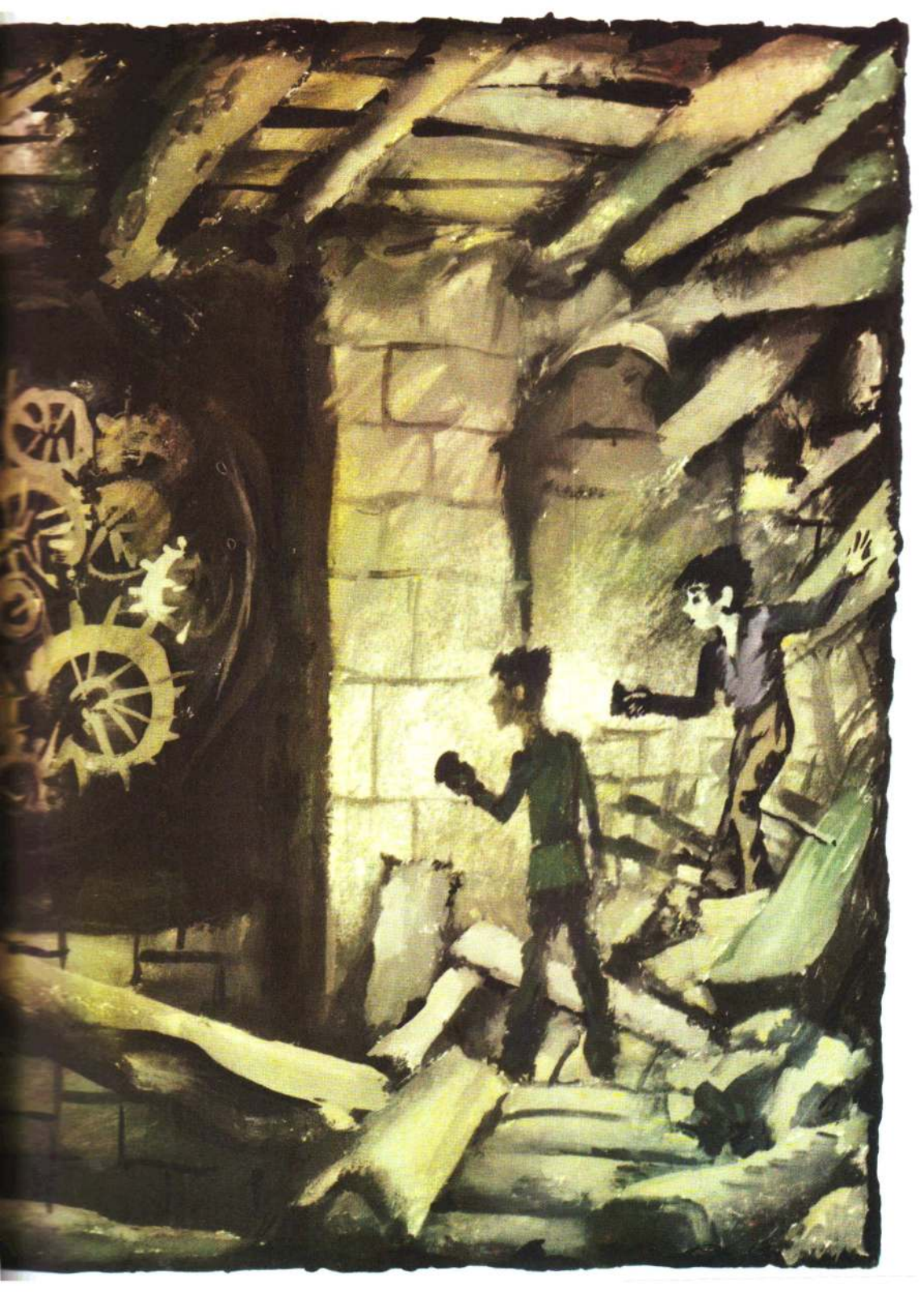
And, sure enough, by the wall there was a small square hatch with a ladder. However, I still got to it before Vitalka and hastily lowered my feet onto the top rung.

The explosion had not damaged the ladder and it did not even rock under me. My torch snatched some floorboards out of the darkness, and I boldly jumped down although I had terrible butterflies in my stomach. And no wonder! Nearby there was a black gaping hole similar to the one on the upper landing.

Vitalka jumped down after me.

Quite unlike the upper landing, it was very dark and eerie here. Only one tiny window gleamed dimly in the thick wall and cracked, broken and charred beams were strewn all around. Our torch beams darted along the brick walls, floorboards, steps and then all of a sudden...

I don't remember who called out first but I think we probably both did: "Gosh, look at that! It's the clock!"



It was, in fact, the clock's mechanism — a pile of brass cogged wheels, which had gone green here and there, and ranged in size from saucer to a wash-basin...

"Look, it's all right. It's just stopped, that's all," said Vitalka in the same tone as one would say of a large placid wild animal, "Look, it's alive — it's just asleep..."

"It was probably shaken up by the blast and something's snapped off," I remarked.

"But what?"

We examined the old brass mechanism as if it was a sleeping elephant.

I was wrong to call it a "pile of cogged wheels" because this was merely a first impression and it was, in fact, nothing of the sort. All cogs and cylinders were beautifully designed and fitted together perfectly.

It looked as if the clock had not been damaged by the explosion.

Many towers have clock-faces on all four sides, but ours had one only in its west side. The old monastery had been built to the east of the town with its clock facing it so that everyone could see it not only from the town but also from aboard ships going upriver, homebound from distant sea voyages. Well, and as it only had one face, its mechanism was located in a deep niche in the wall and not in the tower's centre. And so the heavy bell, as it crashed through the floors, had not so much as scratched it.

"Let's crawl inside," whispered Vitalka, "and have a good look at it." He started crawling towards the mechanism with me close behind.

As bad luck would have it, on this landing the black hole was very close to the niche and the only way of getting to it was along a dusty and slightly charred beam.

But what did Vitalka care! He had black trousers on so the soot wouldn't show on them. Rolling up the hem of his shirt, he sat astride the beam as if it were a gym horse and made his way towards the niche with his weight on his hands.

However, I could not possibily sit down because I was wearing my new blue suit and, what's more, had white socks on, blast them! What could I do?

My heart in my throat, I stood upright on the beam; it was wide and did not sway under me, but even so... I simply don't remember how I walked across that terrible dark hole. I knew that it was a sheer

drop of about forty metres down to the ground! It's fine when you've a magic carpet under you but your legs buckle down when you haven't.

More dead than alive, I jumped down beside Vitalka who was gazing at me with admiration. At once I felt proud of myself for even though I had been scared out of my wits, I had still accomplished a heroic feat. And so that Vitalka should not think I was boasting, I said casually, "Well, anything interesting here?"

We were literally right inside the giant clock, surrounded by brass gears and levers, and facing two cogged shafts with huge chains across them which disappeared through openings in the brickwork.

"They're like the windlasses aboard Dad's ship," whispered Vitalka.

And in my mind's eye I also saw the anchor drums in the motorship's prow.

"But what are they doing here?"

"Why, they're weights, of course!"

"Very well, one chain's got a weight on the end of it, but what about the other?"

"The other one probably has one, too. One weight's for the hands and the other for the bells — just like the special chain for the cuckoo in Auntie Valya's clock. Have you forgotten?"

Goodness, how dim I was!..

I imagined the powerful pig-iron weights, a hundred stone apiece, dozing on chains deep inside the tower. What would happen if they got fed up of hanging there and pulled the chain a little harder? The idea made me feel rather frightened and excited.

"Vitalka!" I said in a scared whisper. "What if the clock suddenly starts ticking! These cogs will make mincemeat of us..."

"It won't," replied Vitalka coolly. "Look, the beam's holding the pendulum back."

The sharp broken end of the beam we had crawled along appeared to be jammed in the mechanism's lower part. Down below, on the end of a rod we could see a bronze cymbal-like disc — a pendulum!

"So that's why it's stopped..." said Vitalka thoughtfully.

We at once glanced at one another because we had both thought of the same thing at the same time: what if we removed the beam?

"But how?" I asked.

"Saw it off with a hack-saw."

"But where do we get the saw?"

"Why, at home, of course!"

"So we'll have to fly back for it?"

Vitalka shrugged his shoulders. After all, flying back was no great hardship, was it? Imagine people waking up the next morning, and seeing that the clock was going over the town!

Vitalka sat astride the beam again, hopped along it like a frog, took off the rope which was hanging over his shoulder and tossed one end to me.

"Tie it round just in case..."

I did as I was told — I'd done enough heroics for one day.

We climbed onto the top landing, slipped through the arch and flew straight off home.

We got there quickly because we did not pause to admire the moon and the town lights. All was quiet at home. Auntie Valya was asleep. Vitalka dragged the tool box out ever so carefully so as not to make a noise and found the saw.

"It's blunt... Well, it'll have to do. But what's the time?"

We looked at the watch which had belonged to Auntie Valya's grandfather. It said half-past twelve.

"Gosh!" Vitalka said. He took the watch off the nail, slipped it into his pocket and attached its chain to his belt.

"What do we need that for?"

"What time is it on the big clock?" asked Vitalka.

"What? Well, five to... or three minutes to one..."

"See! Going by this one, we'll start it off at three minutes to one. But we'll have to look sharp because if we are late, how will we turn the hands? Any idea?"

I had none. It would, of course, be impossible to move them manually and we hadn't sorted out the mechanism yet.

"Off we go!" ordered Vitalka.

We flew back fast and were chilled to the bone, but then the belfry now seemed cosy and familiar.

We hurriedly climbed down to the mechanism again and, forgetting about our tidy new clothes, crawled on our knees, valiantly collecting on the way old soot, cobwebs, lime, brick dust and the green film from the brass. And these layers of dirt would later testify to all our adventures.

Vitalka told me to take hold of his shirt, and picked up the hack-saw.

The saw was really blunt, and the wood turned out to be hard.

Soon Vitalka was wet with perspiration and started muttering in an angry hoarse voice, and so I took over.

The saw kept getting stuck and I had to jerk it out each time, muttering words which would have made Auntie Valya fall in a dead faint. Vitalka sympathetically breathed down my neck and said as a reminder once in a while, "Six minutes left... Three... Two."

But what could I do? I was working hard, wasn't I? I was just about to tell Vitalka to go and jump in the hole which was gaping below us when all of a sudden the beam snapped! The heavy pendulum had pressed against the almost sawn-off end and it snapped off, crashed down and struck the flag-stones on the ground floor. The whole tower rumbled.

I sprang back so as not to crash down with the broken beam-end. And then a loud ringing sound struck out overhead. Once! Twice!

Twang! Twang! And off it went!

It was the pendulum swinging to the left and hitching a little brass hook onto a small sunflower-shaped wheel, which in turn moved another gear.

"Hurrah!... It's going..." said Vitalka in a whisper.

"Hurrah!" I roared.

"Hurrah!" we yelled together.

I very much wanted to write about how a flock of birds, frightened by our shouting, flushed up into the sky, but if the truth be told, nothing of the sort happened. For some reason or other there weren't any birds living here and only an echo rang round the tower. But so what! We were like birds ourselves! Flying magicians! We had brought the old clock to life and its brass wheels were now clanging cheerfully as if saying "thank you".

"It's almost right," said Vitalka, pulling his watch out of his pocket. "Look, it's five to one."

Five to one! The middle of the night!

"Let's go home, Vitalka. If Auntie Valya wakes up and finds out, we won't half catch it."

"All right," Vitalka agreed cheerfully. "We've done what we set out to do."

He tried to climb onto the beam and exclaimed in surprise, "Hey, what are you holding onto me for?"

"Me?"

"Who else?" He tried to turn round but couldn't. I looked over

his shoulder and saw that his long shirt was caught in a gear and two cogs were turning slowly and "gobbling up" his embroidered hem.

"Your shirt..." I whispered very faintly.

Vitalka glanced over his shoulder and seeing what was wrong, pulled hard but it was well and truly caught.

And the wheels were moving quite fast and chewing up more and more material with their sharp teeth. In a couple of minutes' time they would get to Vitalka himself.

"Well, do something!" shrieked Vitalka in despair and pulled again. "It's a new shirt!"

Fancy, he was still thinking of the shirt!

I was now well and truly scared and for the first time in my life felt my legs shaking with fear. It felt as if a large engine was revving up underneath the floor.

But I simply had to collect my wits! So I angrily shifted from foot to foot to stop them shaking and then felt the handle of my knife wobbling by my right knee. How could I have forgotten it!

I grabbed my dagger and chopped off a piece of the hem.

"Have you gone off your rocker?" Vitalka wailed wretchedly.

"Have I? Look!"

Vitalka stared down at the scrap of material being devoured by the sharp cogs and wiped his sweaty brow.

"Phew... The clock sure went and bit a chunk off me! Oh well, at least it's working."

"Let's get going," I said.

At that very moment a tremendous booming sound came from the bells. We squatted and I dropped the knife which went hurling downwards.

"It's striking!" Vitalka exclaimed joyfully and triumphantly.

"Aren't we clever!"

Back at home we felt slightly less happy after we had counted our losses and reckoned some of the possible unpleasant consequences.

Our cuts and scratches didn't count because they'd heal in no time, but it was a pity about the knife. However, that wasn't the main thing. A glance at myself in the mirror set me thinking hard and I realised that if I did not wash my things fast, I'd certainly be in for a whale of a time the next day... My suit was miraculously still intact but my white socks were anything but white.

"Let's get some hot water and a basin," I said in despair.

"Why, that's nothing at all," replied Vitalka. "But what am I going to do about my shirt? You've lopped off half the hem..."

"Crikey," I said sympathetically.

There was indeed a piece missing at the back of his shirt as if he had been chased by a shark. However, Vitalka was a strong-willed individual, and it was not until he helped me warm some water on the stove that he gave way to his grief.

"Perhaps it can be mended somehow?" he asked and then answered hopelessly himself, "Oh dash it! Of course it can't!"

"But maybe we could make a tuck behind?" I suggested, as I sembled my socks in the basin. "You know, like fitted shirts have?"

"A tuck, my foot!" he said sarcastically. "What kind of tuck will cover a wopping great hole like that? Couldn't you have chopped off a bit less?"

"No, I couldn't," I said confidently, splashing the water out the window. "If I had you'd have been turned into pulp."

"But Auntie Valya's going to do that to me now anyway," said Vitalka dismally.

"Well... We'll think of something tomorrow morning."

Vitalka sighed and hung his shirt on the back of his chair in such a way that the hole was not visible.

Over the town the clock struck half past one.

Chapter Thirteen

We did not, however, think of anything the next morning because we overslept, and as she could not wake us by tapping the ceiling, Auntie Valya came upstairs.

We were awoken by the sound of her steps and remembered everything in a flash. Vitalka jumped into his trousers in a trice, cheerfully called out "good morning" and stood between her and the chair with his shirt on it.

"Good morning... What's made you sleep so late again?" asked Auntie Valya in a slightly suspicious tone.

"We got carried away reading *Tom Sawyer* last night," I replied hastily.

Auntie Valya shook her head, which meant that little boys should not stay up late reading even if it's a very good book but that she, Auntie Valya, did not intend to say anything about this as she hoped we would realise ourselves that we had acted wrongly and would not make the same mistake again.

"Get washed and come have your breakfast," she said.

"Right!" rapped Vitalka rather too loudly and Auntie Valya pressed her fingertips to her temples and hurried downstairs.

That morning Vitalka and I tried to be obedient and well-mannered, but nothing good ever comes of trying too hard. Vitalka was in so much of a hurry to get to breakfast that he forgot to take the watch out of his pocket. His pockets were frayed and threadbare, and the watch heavy and when we came in for breakfast, it finally dropped through his pocket and hung on the end of its chain which was attached to his belt. What's more, the chain was long and his pants short, and the watch could be seen dangling below his knees.

"My word!" exclaimed Auntie Valya in surprise. "Why are you carrying Grandpa's watch about with you? And in such a strange manner, too! It might be old but it's still valuable."

Vitalka awkwardly mumbled something about him only needing it for a moment. Generally speaking, he was a sharp enough fellow, but he was no good at lying to his aunt, and, what's more, he loathed doing it.

I realised I had to come to his rescue fast.

"Auntie Valya, we wanted to synchronize it with the one on the belfry! You know, while we were sitting up last night, we suddenly heard the clock strike. Fancy being silent for all this time and then suddenly working again! Strange, isn't it?"

"Yes, that is strange..." agreed Auntie Valya perplexedly. "But I don't understand..."

At that moment, however, the sound of striking bells came through the open windows. Ding-dong! Ding-dong!.. Ten times. (Yes, we certainly had slept late that morning!)

"Amazing!" said Auntie Valya. "I didn't even notice. So they've mended the town clock..."

"We were going to run out and find out," muttered Vitalka. "Because we can't see it from the window."

Auntie Valya had a habit, however, of getting to the bottom of things.

"Why did you have to see it? You can find out the time when it strikes."

Vitalka started blinking confusedly.

"But, you know, it sometimes strikes late," I came to his rescue again. "Or too early like your cuckoo, which starts popping out when it's still five to."

Auntie Valya enjoyed intelligent explanations.

"I see," she said. "Well, have breakfast first before you go out, and do take care of the watch."

Outside Vitalka said gloomily, "What am I going to do about the shirt?"

I had no idea. "Maybe she won't be very angry?" I asked hesitantly.

"What's that got to do with it? She'll start asking questions about how it happened! And then she'll find out where we were last night. If you ask me, she's already guessed something."

"Well, what if you say you just caught it on something and ripped it?"

"But where's the missing bit, then? It could be sewn on, you know."

"Well, you lost it. After all, it was night-time..."

"That's just it! She's bound to ask, 'And who allowed you to go off at night, my dears?'"

I began feeling gloomy, too.

"'Ripped it', he says!" Vitalka grumbled, "Anyone can see it was cut off with a knife... She is sure to find out. I've never really lied to her. Do you think she believed what you said about the clock? I'm sure she didn't!"

"Let's own up," I said.

He twisted his head and sighed, "But what about the carpet?"

"What about it? Do you think she'll take it away?"

"Well, we did promise not to get up to any more pranks with the carpet... No, she won't take it away. She's kind — you know that. She'll just tell us not to fly anywhere without her keeping an eye on us because she's afraid for us. Or make us promise only to fly about the yard. Can you imagine it?"

Yes, the future did not look very bright... But it was a sunny day and there was masses of time left until evening and so, deciding it was not worth getting totally despondent yet, we ran over to Breezy's place. You see, we had not seen him and Vetka since our journey and adventure in the old house.

They were sitting on the porch, mending the bicycle's buckled frame and front wheel.

"So you tried it out after all," I said in dismay.

Vetka and Breezy were thrilled to see us and, interrupting each other, told us that their flying bicycle had successfully taken off downhill but then nose-dived and crashed into a patch of ashberry bushes. After that Breezy had limped all day and Vetka had gone about with a scratched nose. But this was not a serious set-back because they knew where they had gone wrong: they had made wings but forgotten about a stabilizer. Next time they would know better. though.

Then we told them about our adventures and they were sad they had not been with us, especially on the belfry, and asked us why we had not asked them along.

"We had to leave fast, and it was night-time," explained Vitalka. "Never mind, we'll fly together some other time ... if everything works out all right."

"Why do you say that?" asked Vetka anxiously.

Vitalka sadly told them about his shirt, and the four of us put our heads together and tried to think of a way out.

"But why do you have to wear it outside?" asked Breezy. "If you tuck it into your trousers, it'll look even better! And when you get back from the circus, you can stuff it away somewhere and then see how things go."

Vitalka scratched the bridge of his nose with his nail and said pensively, "That's an idea..."

But the idea did not appeal to Auntie Valya. We were all set to leave for the circus when she suddenly exclaimed, "Vitalka! What have you done! The hem's got such a lovely folk-style embroidery on it."

"So what if it has!" replied Vitalka. "I like it better like this."

"You just don't understand anything. It's very beautiful. You can't see it like others can."

Vitalka tried arguing but Auntie Valya said, "Vitalka, you're quite impossible."

And so he quickly pulled the shirt out from inside his belt, hung his head and joined his hands behind his back to hide the missing piece of hem. He looked like a guilty little girl and I felt sorry for him.

"I'll cover you from behind," I whispered.

"Right."

So off we set to the circus and along the way Auntie Valya asked several times why I was lagging behind Vitalka instead of walking beside him.

But everything went off all right and after we had settled in our seats in the fourth row, Vitalka pressed his spine against the back of his seat and relaxed a little.

I am not going to describe the performance because it has nothing to do with our adventures. Suffice it to say that the famous clown, Karandash, was on the arena, and it was wonderful. Vitalka and I laughed so much that we forgot about all our troubles.

But we remembered again as soon as the interval came.

Auntie Valya informed us she would stay put but we could go and get an ice-cream if we wanted to.

Well, of course we did. So Vitalka took the money and, like a courtier before a queen, backed out of the row onto the staircase. Then we formed a "close column" with me right behind him and set off in search of ice-cream.

There was quite a crush and a queue in the refreshments room. We were pushed and jostled on all sides and had no need to worry about anyone spotting the hole in the hem. About ten minutes later our turn came and we bought three ices — one and a half each — and pushed our way out of the crowd.

We squatted under a cupboard containing a fire tap in a far corner and slowly devoured all three ices.

We were already sadly licking the bare sticks when someone came up and stood by us and we heard someone say in an insinuating tone, "Young men, would you be so kind as to answer one question..."

Standing near us was a dark-haired, beaky fellow in narrow lilac trousers, bright orange socks and a huge vivid shirt with palm-trees and monkeys on it, the latest rage among fashion worshippers.

We disliked show-offs. We got up, Vitalka hitched up his shirt and nonchalantly shoved his hands in his pockets. And as I did not have any, I crossed my arms over my chest like Napoleon, moved one foot in a squeaking sandal to one side and asked,

"What do you want?"

"My, what badly-mannered children," said the fellow benevolently and then at once grew more serious and said, "All right. Now, joking apart, I've got business to discuss with you. Want to know what kind of business?"

We did, but we did not let on. Beaky smiled condescendingly and said, "Got no questions? Well then, I'll ask mine — just one for the time being..."

Drilling holes in each of us in turn with his eyes, he enunciated, "How did you get inside the belfry, messieurs?"

To this day I am proud to remember that Vitalka and I did not so much as bat an eyelid. But it's impossible to describe how cold I felt inside! Later on Vitalka told me he had felt just the same.

"Mum's the word?" asked Beaky. "Well done. Silence is golden. But I urge you to be perfectly frank with me — it's in your own interests. And so that there's no misunderstanding, allow me to show you this bit of evidence."

And he brought out the missing piece of Vitalka's shirt.

Yes, the very same piece! Crinkled, stained green by the brass and embroidered...

We stared at it as we would have done at the words "Conduct — Poor" in a school report.

Beaky smirked, leant over and, raising the edge of Vitalka's shirt, fitted the piece into place.

"A perfect fit," he said. "So now what? Are we going to cooperate?"

Vitalka gulped and said in a rather hoarse but bold tone, "But why must we speak to you?"

"Oh!" said Beaky. "I forgot to explain. This isn't just a private conversation, it's official-like."

He took a little red book out of his pocket and waved it in front of our noses without opening it.

We kept a dejected silence and then all of a sudden a piercing bell rang out overhead, making us jump.

"Jumpy, aren't we," said Beaky. "That's our hectic, mad world for you... Did we come here on our own?"

"No, with our aunt..." muttered Vitalka.

"With Auntie Valya," I said.

"Well, we won't make auntie worry, shall we," decided Beaky. "She's not to blame. Off we go now and we'll meet here tomorrow by the bench to the left of the entrance. At nine. O'kay?"

"O'kay," Vitalka replied gloomily.

Beaky smiled craftily and said, "That's right. Got our heads screwed on properly, we have! Now, mum's the word. Got it? Notice I'm not asking your names or where you live. Why? Because I trust you.

Well, and if you don't turn up ... this isn't a big town, you know that yourselves, and it's not hard to find a person. Got it?"

We most certainly had and that's why we did not particularly enjoy the second part of the show featuring a famous lion tamer and her lions. And, worst of all, we could not discuss our latest predicament in front of Auntie Valya and so just had to suffer in silence.

We were also quiet on the way home and Auntie Valya anxiously asked if we were feeling all right. Without thinking, I replied that we had stomach-ache probably from the ice-creams. Auntie Valya then grew even more alarmed and said she would make some hot water-bottles for us, if we did not mind them.

Vitalka was also lost in thought, and forgetting he was talking to Auntie Valya and not me, exclaimed absent-mindedly, "What's there to mind? Water-bottles aren't like enemas, are they!"

Auntie Valya gasped and declared that Vitalka had become quite impossible. Obviously, he was approaching that awful age which all teachers dreaded and she, Auntie Valya, would have to reassess her idea on upbringing.

Vitalka hastily replied that she had no need to do so and said he had not meant to be rude.

At home we turned down supper and went off to bed early, saying that sleep would be the best healer.

But we certainly did not feel like sleeping.

"So this is where all our flying's landed us..." said Vitalka gloomily. "The police isn't like Auntie Valya, you know. We won't wriggle out of this one."

"But what have we done that's so awful? Surely fixing the clock isn't a crime? On the contrary, we've done everyone a good turn."

"They'll take our carpet away and that's all the thanks we'll get..."

"But what right have they got? It's our carpet! Auntie Valya gave it to us as a present, and that's that!"

"So what if she did? But are we allowed to fly? You're not even allowed on a motorbike until you're sixteen, let alone in the air..."

"But we won't mention the carpet."

"But what will we say then? How did we get inside?"

"Any old how... We climbed up. Perhaps the ladders are still intact [illegible]. And if they're not, then we used ropes. It's hard for grown-ups [illegible] we're light..."

"But how did we get to the ladders? The door's locked, isn't it!"

"Well ... we found the key."

"We did, did we? Then they'll at once ask where it is."

"And we'll say we lost it."

"Found it, lost it... Do you reckon they're fools? They'll ask what it was like."

"Well, so what? We'll make something up. We'll say it was sort of large and..."

"Sort of large! Do you know what the lock on the door looks like? No, you don't and neither do I. We've never even been near the door. And perhaps it doesn't have a lock and is just nailed up..."

Then Vitalka raised himself on one elbow and said resolutely, "We'll have to fly over and take a look at the door." And he added sadly, "If you're going to lie, you must make it sound like the truth."

We did not, however, fly anywhere that night, because Auntie Valya spent a long time pottering about downstairs, washing the dishes, and we had both fallen asleep by the time she had finished.

Chapter Fourteen

Whether we liked it or not, we had to go and meet Beaky the next morning.

On the way there Vitalka went on and on about the police. Did not they have anything better to do than bother about the old belfry? They'd do better to catch the thieves who had recently burgled a household goods shop and two booths at the market. The whole town was talking about it, but they obviously had other fish to fry...

The clock on the belfry struck nine but the sound no longer gave us any joy.

"I wonder how the police got up there," I said.

"Perhaps they didn't..."

"But what about the scrap of material?"

"What about it?" Vitalka snapped. "Perhaps it slid through the works and floated through the holes all the way down to the ground... Why couldn't it have got caught on something on the way?"

Beaky was waiting for us sitting on the bench with another fellow who also had a long nose, except that it was straight and very thin as if it had been patted on both sides for a long time. In fact, it looked as if you would be able to see through it in sunlight. He had fair hair sparsely covering his shiny pink scalp.

"You're late, gentlemen," Beaky said reproachfully. "It won't do... Well, time's money, so don't let's waste it. Sit down and give us the facts. Honesty's great virtue, you know."

And then Vitalka did something unexpected. He stood in front of Beaky and said boldly, "If you're from the police, please show me your book again."

Beaky blinked in confusion and his friend suddenly blushed and little beads of sweat broke out on his paper-thin nose.

"Look'ere ... cut it out," demanded Pinky quietly.

But Beaky suddenly burst out laughing jovially and said, "We are experienced, aren't we... Well done! Only we're from the municipal museum and not the police. Got it? I'm a junior research worker, and Fedya here's a fitter and electrician. In fact, he's a jack of all trades."

"Jack" sighed for some reason and wiped the beads off his nose.

We felt a wave of relief. At least, they weren't from the police.

"By the way, my name's Edik," said Beaky. "What're yours?"

We named ourselves.

"Well, you see it's like this," explained Edik. "Our museum's decided to repair the belfry and get the clock going. It's an important historical site in the town, you realise. But nobody knows how to get inside. Its lock's old and valuable and it's a shame to break it. But the key's lost... But while we were thinking things over and guessing, the clock started working again! Who on earth could have mended it? What a marvellous thing to do! And then suddenly last night I spotted this young lad in the shirt which this here scrap comes from..."

"If you've never been in the belfry, how did you come by the scrap?" Vitalka interrupted him.

Edik burst out laughing again and even shook his head.

"My, oh my! You're a real sharp detective! Who said we haven't? He has!" And Edik glanced at Fedya, who had been keeping very quiet. "After the clock started working, he climbed up the outside

wall to the top. Fedya here's a steeplejack and an ace mountain-climber."

Lanky fair-haired Fedya certainly did not look like an ace mountain-climber but you never can tell...

"And now, gentlemen, let's get down to brass tacks," said Edik. hugging our shoulders and sitting us down beside him. "Have you brought the key along?"

"What key?" I asked stupidly.

"You git!" said Edik slightly annoyedly. "From the belfry, of course. Or did you open it with your finger?"

"No, with a key," said Vitalka hastily and gave me a meaningful glance. "We found it in Auntie Valya's attic where she keeps tons of old things."

"I'm afraid you'll have to hand it over," Edik informed us. "As you know, the belfry's a branch of the museum and so we're responsible for it. And if people start climbing up there and maybe breaking their necks... Well, never mind, that's not the main thing. The keys are needed for the job in hand. First, so that the tower can be repaired and, secondly, so that the clock can be wound up. How much longer do you reckon it can keep going? When the chain comes all the way down, there'll be nobody to pull up the weight. Right?"

That was true. We hadn't thought about the weights.

"It'll be a pity if the clock stops..." said Edik pensively.

And then Fedya the mountain-climber unexpectedly piped up and said, "You know, I ... won't go up there again. I almost crashed down, I did. And ... our chiefs are getting hopping mad."

"We understand," replied Vitalka. "But we haven't got the key. We lost it."

I was afraid he would get into a muddle and so hastened to butt in, "To tell you the truth, we didn't even lose it... You see, it was really scary up in the tower. We almost fell down. And it was dark... Well and ... what if the machine-gunner's skeleton was somewhere about... We started the clock and then after we got downstairs again, we decided we'd never climb it again and so threw the key away."

"Where?"

Vitalka forestalled me: "In the grass somewhere."

"Well, maybe you'll find it?"

Vitalka shrugged his shoulders.

"It was dark. Well, maybe we shall. I doubt it though..."

"Do us a favour, lads," said Edik. "You understand, our work depends on it. Do your best. O'kay?"

"O'kay," said Vitalka.

I threw him an angry glance.

"If you find it, bring it here tomorrow," said Edik. "At the same time. Is that a deal?"

We said it was and set off home.

"That was a fantastic story about the key," Vitalka said admiringly. "Sounded really true. I'll never learn to lie like that. You'll probably be a writer."

I replied that, first of all, writers did not lie but merely fantasised and that, secondly, he, Vitalka, was a holey sack of sawdust. Why did he stick his foot in it? He should have said we threw the key into the river and that would have been the end of it.

"But what if we really do find the key?" asked Vitalka.

That made me stop in my tracks.

"Where? If we never had it in the first place!"

"Well, any old key then. It just might fit the lock, mightn't it?"

"But why?"

"Well, what about the clock? Everybody's already saying how good it is that it's been put right. It won't do if it stops, will it?"

That was true. I had not thought about the clock. But where could we find the key?

"We must look at the lock first," explained Vitalka. "We'll be able to tell more or less by the keyhole what kind of key we need."

"Right!"

The monastery was right across the other side of town. We tried going there by bus, but as we did not have any money, the conductress turfed us off. Then we took a short cut along the riverbank. Every now and again we had to cross vegetable plots and we were shouted at by their owners but we arrived there in no time at all.

The monastery's cobbled courtyard was warm, sunny and empty. Tall blades of grass were sticking out between the cobble-stones with butterflies swaying on them. Two doves were lazily flying between the peeling domes of the old church.

The belfry's broad shadow was stretching across the cobblestones. Keeping out of the sun, we walked along it to the door as if it were a path.

There was nobody about. We had heard that there were some workshops in the monastery's long building, but it looked empty at present.

However, it still seemed that we weren't alone. All of a sudden a large, shaggy grey dog came round the corner of a house and headed straight towards us. We froze, wondering what it was going to do.

It came up, stared hard at us, sniffed Vitalka's plimsolls and my new sandals and then yawned, wagged its tail and walked away.

"There's a clever dog! It recognises good people," said Vitalka.

"I wonder how our dog is back there in the woodland house?" I said.

"I often think about it, too," replied Vitalka. "I'm so sorry for it..."

We went up to the door, which was made of strong blocks and hung on massive cast-iron hinges. Its lock was massive, too, and consisted of an iron hexagonal plate with superimposed brass patterns and a keyhole in the middle, about the size of my little finger.

"Why, it's certainly some key we've got to find," Vitalka said with a sigh.

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out the silver wrapping of one of the ices we had eaten at the circus the day before. He placed it against the keyhole and rubbed it with his finger so that a rubbing was left on the paper.

"It'll be easier picking a key this way," he explained.

"Picking a key!" I said sceptically. "But where?"

The dog came up again, sat down and looked kindly at us as if taking in everything we said.

Vitalka opened his mouth to say something but at that moment the clock started striking. Ding! Dong! Ding! Dong! Ten times...

We stood, craning our necks and gazing up at the clock-face and so did the dog. Clock... dog... key...

"Vitalka! Do you remember the clock in that house?"

"Well?.."

"What was hanging on the weight?"

Vitalka blinked, scratched his nose as if trying to get rid of his freckles, and then yelled joyfully, "A key!"

Luck was on our side once again for Auntie Valya wasn't at home. Vitalka wrote the following on a paper napkin: "Auntie Valya, we'll be out till evening and will lunch at Oleg's."

"Do you think she'll believe it?" I asked.

"Well, what else can we do?" asked Vitalka resolutely jabbing the note onto the spear of an old cast-iron knight (under which Auntie Valya kept letters and various receipts).

We were in a hurry, but this time had the sense to dress up warmly so as not to get chilled by the wind when flying very fast.

"Just as long as it doesn't rain again," I muttered, slipping into an old school shirt.

"It won't," replied Vitalka confidently. "Today's a good day and everything'll be fine. We'll get the key and spend some time with the dog..."

I don't know why we decided that the key from the woodland house would fit the lock on the belfry door. In my heart of hearts I realised there was no hope or almost none, but this whole story was becoming more and more like a mysterious fairy-tale and whoever would refuse to be in a fairy-tale? What's more, since we had a flying carpet why shouldn't there be other wonders in the world?

But I would still have thought twice about flying there if it had not been for the dog. I felt sorry for it and somewhat guilty, as if we'd abandoned it...

From the fridge we took three raw rissoles, added to it a chunk of bread and five lumps of sugar for the dog and then unrolled the carpet on the roof.

"Perhaps we should tie on the tail?" I suggested. "After all, we'll be flying in daylight..."

"We haven't time," said Vitalka. "Let's just fly low over the vegetable plots and then dive under the steep bank..."

And so we sped along the lanes, keeping close to the fences, flew over the vegetable plots and wattlefences, dived into the shadow of the steep riverbank, then under the bridge and then, skimming the tops of the grass, headed for the edge of the wood.

It's quite likely someone spotted us and gazed in bewilderment after us, but this no longer worried us.

Once we reached the wood, we soared over the tops of the trees and headed towards the geodesic tower.

We flew very fast and the oncoming air literally howled about us. In order to fly at top speed, we lay flat against the carpet and the wind pressed Vitalka's beret against his head and tried to rip my school cap off mine but I had its strap under my chin.

It was really weird: the oncoming wind was blowing cold air over us while the sun was warming our backs through our shirts, and on the whole we felt hot rather than cold.

The flight did not seem as long as the first time. It took us about one and a half hours to reach the dark lake where we caught sight of the old house's roof.

We landed by the porch. The door was ajar just as it had been before. We went in. I no longer felt scared, but still slightly nervous. The sun-light was lying in squares on the dusty creaking floor. We paused and listened but could hear nothing except for our own breathing.

Then all of a sudden Vitalka said, "The clock's stopped."

We tore into the small room.

The clock really had stopped. The chain with the weight and key on it had sunk all the way down to the floor. And lying on the floor beneath the clock with its face buried in its outstretched paws was the ginger dog. A yellow caterpillar was crawling along the back of its neck.

"It's asleep," Vitalka whispered and then smacked his lips and called, "Hey, dog! Get up! Come here!"

But the dog did not even stir, so we went up ourselves and at once realised that it was not asleep for its eyes were open and still.

"Poor thing," said Vitalka, squatting down and quite fearlessly stroking the dead dog.

I also ran my palm over its ginger coat and flicked the caterpillar off it. The dog was very thin and you could feel its hard ribs through its skin.

And yet it could not have died of hunger for it had lived so long on its own. No, it had died either of loneliness or old age or perhaps both. It probably knew it was dying but could not leave as it was waiting for someone and did not want to abandon the clock.

I stood up and took hold of the chain in order to puff the weight up for I wanted the clock to tick in memory of the dog.

"Don't," said Vitalka.

"Why not?"

"Well ... it's not our clock, you know. It's the dog's..."

Yes, he was right. We shouldn't touch it and, in fact, had no right to. On the other hand, our clock over the town should not be allowed to stop.

As I squatted down again and unhitched the heavy key off the weight, it occurred to me that the key was hanging there as an extra weight, and the clock could not work without it.

I told Vitalka as much but he pooh-poohed it saying, "So what! They could have hung a stone on it and, anyway, it makes no difference now... But what shall we do with the dog? We can't leave it like this."

"We need a spade," I said.

We found one behind the stove in the kitchen. It was rusty and blunt but there was nothing to sharpen it with.

Then we started digging a grave under a rose briar at the back of the house. Its roots got in our way and the ground was quite hard but we silently took turns to toss up the black earth and clay without ever once grumbling.

When the edge of the hole came up above our knees Vitalka said hoarsely, "That'll do, I think..."

We picked some burdocks near the house, lined the inside of the grave with them and then carried the dog out and laid it in it.

We then had to fill in the grave, but I could not stand the idea of clods of clay falling into the dog's open eyes and getting entangled in its ginger fur. So, as there were no burdocks left, I pulled my shirt over my head. It was the one I had been wearing that day two years ago when I decided to run away to the woods, so it was quite old and did not matter.

"Grab hold of the collar and pull," I ordered Vitalka.

We ripped the shirt's front in half so that it was like an open jacket, and covered the dog with it. Its tail and paws still stuck out but there was nothing we could do about that. Then we filled the grave in.

"I saw a piece of plywood lying about somewhere..." Vitalka said.

He went off to the house and came back carrying an oblong strip of plywood. Then he got out a pencil stub for, like all artists, he always carried a pencil around just in case.

He scratched the bridge of his nose with the stub, stared through me and then bent over the strip of plywood and wrote: "Here lies a dog."

After a moment's thought, he crossed out "a" and changed the small "d" into a big one.

"As it hasn't got a name, let's call it that. Agreed?"

I nodded.

He wrote the following in large straight letters: "HERE LIES DOG. IT LIVED IN THIS HOUSE. AFTER EVERYONE ELSE HAD GONE AWAY, IT STAYED ON AND WOUND THE CLOCK."

Then he put a full-stop, glanced very gravely at me, and asked, "What else shall I write?"

"There's no need for anything else," I replied.

Then we pulled two nails out of the rickety door (which were half out, anyway), found half a brick under the porch and used it to fix the plywood board to the spade handle. It took us a long time because the plywood was hard and the rusty nails kept bending. We both banged our fingers with the brick and scraped the skin off our knuckles, which was enough to make anybody cry. But we fixed it in the end and then drove the spade deep into the mound and pounded the earth all over with our fists.

Chapter Fifteen

On the way back I felt rather low and did not notice at first that we were flying slowly. And when I did and tried to urge the carpet on, it seemed reluctant to obey and I realised Vitalka was keeping it firmly under control.

"Do buck up," I said. "Why waste time?.."

"But you haven't got much on and you'll catch cold in the wind."

"No, I won't. The air's warm. Get a move on..."

"Buck up! Get a move on!" he mimicked angrily. "You've already got a snuffle as it is."

But it was not because of a cold that I was speaking huskily: it was because I was choking back my tears. I wasn't shy of Vitalka and told him the truth: "It's just that I feel like crying."

"Well, go ahead then," he said understandingly.

My eyes were brimming but I held back my tears and even managed to smile. "No, I'm not going to. The carpet'll get wet."

I knew he was also smiling although I could not see his face. He was sitting in front with his legs over the side and I was lying with my head against his back. He had a thin back and I could feel his sharp spinal cord even through his thick sweater. The heady woodland air was flowing over me like a river and its motion was the only indication of speed. The white July clouds were perfectly still overhead. The sun was lighting up iridescent rings on my wet lashes and I had to blink very often to be able to see the clouds. But the wind soon dried my lashes.

"I feel sorry for the dog, don't you?" said Vitalka without turning round.

"Yes," I whispered.

But if you really thought about it, was it such a great loss? An old dog we had hardly known had died. What was there to be so sad about? You cry when something really terrible happens like when I was told in hospital about my Dad...

I shook my head to drive away all these gloomy thoughts.

"Stop fidgeting!" said Vitalka. "You'll bash my spine to bits."

"Your poor spine!" I sighed and sat up cross-legged and put the key which I had been gripping, down in front of me. About twenty centimetres long and hexagonal like a thick pencil, it had a voluted ring, an intricately patterned end and freckle-like spots of rust all over it.

What's more, it was heavy. No wonder it had been hung on the weight!

But towards the end the weight and the key had probably proved too heavy for the ailing dog and so it had lain down under the clock never to rise again. Then the clock had stopped, and it was now standing silently in the completely empty and totally unwanted house.

It's a bad thing when a house is totally unwanted. While the dog lived in it, it was still a house but heaven know what would happen to it now...

And it's also a bad thing when a clock isn't working when it could be.

Here I go again! I hit my leg with the key to chase away these depressing thoughts, and Vitalka glanced round again.

"Here, let me shove it in my pocket, or else you'll lose it."

"Your pockets are full of holes, and always will be!" I said glumly, opened my buckle and hung the key on my belt. "It'll be safer here."

"Oh, aren't we dim!" exclaimed Vitalka. "We haven't checked it!"

He pulled the silver wrapping with the keyhole rubbing out of his pocket and we put the end of the key against it.

"It seems to fit all right, doesn't it?" Vitalka said in a surprised whisper.

"Well, it certainly fits on the outside but do you reckon it'll turn inside?"

Well, it did.

And most amazingly, it turned smoothly and effortlessly and without making a sound, as if the lock had been greased only yesterday.

Vitalka and I glanced at each other, more in fright than in joy, and then took hold of the brass door ring and pulled. The door also opened easily and soundlessly.

It was as if we were standing in front on a giant who had just woken up and started breathing deeply again: dusky humid air came gushing towards us out of the door as if it were a dark cavernous mouth...

After standing in the doorway for a few moments, I asked in a whisper, "Well, shall we go in?"

Vitalka nodded and glancing round, shook his fist at Vetka, and stepped into the shadows, with me close behind.

Vetka stayed behind in hiding among the burdocks and thistles by the monastery wall.

We needed someone, you see, to keep a look-out for us because many inexplicable things were going on and the situation was beginning to look dangerous. And this is why...

The day before we arrived home early without any mishaps and Auntie Valya had not even begun to worry. It would seem we should be feeling as pleased as Punch but Vitalka was in a gloomy mood, and eventually said, "I don't like it..."

"What?"

"Oh, those fellows from the museum. Why did Fedya keep going pale and stammering? And he doesn't look like a mountain-climber."

I thought how true that was — he really did not look like one.

"Have you got a coin to make a phone call?" asked Vitalka.

I found one in my breast pocket. It was the change from our ice-lollies at the circus.

Without explaining anything, Vitalka took me to a call-box at a crossroads, dialled Enquiries and calmly said, "Could I have the number of the town museum, please... Thank you."

I always envied the confident way he spoke on the phone, while I became shy when speaking to strangers and began stammering.

Vitalka put the coin in the slot and began dialling.

"Do you reckon they're still at work? It's already eight o'clock," I said, catching on.

"It's a museum, not an office," said Vitalka. And he turned out to be right because someone answered.

"Good evening," said Vitalka in an eager, top-of-the-form voice. "I'm a member of a regional studies' group. Would it be possible, please, to connect me with your junior research worker... I'm sorry, I don't know his surname but he's called Edik."

Vitalka moved the receiver away from his ear so that I could hear the reply. A distant voice was crackling down the receiver, and I at once pictured a little grey-haired old man in a black scull-cap.

"I'm sorry, young man, but you've obviously made a mistake. There's no research worker of that name here..."

"I'm sorry but he's dark-haired," Vitalka prattled on. "And his nose is sort of ... beaky..."

"No, no," crackled the phone. "You're mistaken. What school are you from?"

"Number 10," Vitalka replied at random, hung up and turned to me.

"And you used to envy me for lying well," I cracked. "You're just as good."

"Got a good teacher, haven't I?!" he promptly replied and then asked, "Well?"

"Well what?"

"They're not from the museum, those ... bloodhounds."

"You mean, they are cops, after all," I said glumly.

Vitalka shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't know... Don't look like it. I don't think we should give them the key. We must first see for ourselves if it fits. And if it does, have a look at what's inside..."

"Now?" I asked.

We glanced guiltily at one another: we were very tired after our flight and it was almost evening and right now the shadowy old belfry did not seem at all inviting. What's more, Uncle Seva and Mum were expecting me at home because I had not seen them for two whole days!

"Tomorrow morning," Vitalka decided. "First thing, before Edik and Fedya show up."

Early next morning I whistled up to Vitalka from the street and he climbed over the roof and jumped down to me. Jingling some coins in my pocket, I said, "Let's go by bus! It'll be quicker!"

Vitalka scratched his nose and said, "Let's get Vetka first."

"Why?"

"She can keep a look-out for us."

"Well, then Breezy would be better."

"He won't go without asking permission, and his mother won't let him out until she's made him eat breakfast. And then she'll start feeding us, too. And we'll waste a lot of time..."

Yes, he was right.

So we ran over to Vetka's, climbed into her front garden and

peered through the window. Vetka was doing exercises in her blue swimsuit but not ordinary exercises: she was holding onto her bedstead and standing on tiptoe and doing all sorts of ballet steps. Sunbeams were prancing over her shoulders and blazing on the nickel bedstead.

Vitalka sighed and gazed at her in admiration, and I must say I did too because she was doing it so well. But remembering the job in hand, I prodded Vitalka with my elbow and rapped the pane with my knuckles.

Vetka glanced round in confusion and then evidently became rather annoyed. She flung open the window and demanded, "What do you want?"

"Help," said Vitalka.

"But where's Sanya?"

"He's probably still snoring his head off," replied Vitalka. "Get dressed. It's no joking matter. We need someone to keep a look-out for us."

Shrugging her shoulders, she pulled her dress on in a flash and jumped outside.

"What exactly do you mean? What's going on?"

"We don't really know ourselves," said Vitalka gravely. "The main thing is that you keep watch. If needs be, we'll shout instructions to you."

Vetka was marvellous. Instead of pestering us with questions, she simply said, "Right!"

So off we ran to the bus stop.

The streets were deserted, fresh and sunny, and the wind got caught in our hair and fluttered Vetka's short frock. The heavy key bounced about on my belt and banged against my hip. And so we hurried towards an adventure.

Once inside the belfry we closed the door behind us so that it did not look unlocked.

Then we looked round. There were narrow apertures like loop-holes at different levels in the thick wall. The sun was shining brightly through them and slicing the shadows with flat razor-like blades of light.

The floor was covered with granite flagstones which were cracked and badly crushed in the middle where the bell had fal-

len. We stared up at the hole in the ceiling and broken beams. There was a brick stairway by the wall leading up to a hatch.

"Shall we climb up?" asked Vitalka.

"Let's."

So up we went to the second storey, which, like the first, had slit windows in its walls and smelt of limestone and damp bricks but was not as quiet. We became aware of a regular tapping sound and a shrill jingle.

"It's the clock tapping away," whispered Vitalka. "Oh, Oleg, look!.."

I glanced behind and spotted a large deep niche containing a cogged wheel with a metre-long lever, or, to be more precise, a cogged drum fixed to an axle sticking out of the wall. Colossal chains were stretching out on both sides of the drum and it was they that were jingling as the mechanism moved.

Three chains were descending through round apertures in the vaulted niche's ceiling and disappearing through similar apertures in the brick floor, all of them, that is, except one which had a rusty weight on it, the size a large milk can.

"Look," whispered Vitalka, "it's moving..."

The weight was going down very, very slowly but you could still see it moving, and it only had half a metre left to go to the floor. This was obviously the end of its journey. Soon it would touch the brick floor and the clock would come to a standstill.

The weight had most likely never touched the floor before for, being so heavy, it would have surely left a dent in it.

Vitalka was about to say something, but all of a sudden the clock overhead struck half past seven... Another weight crawled out through the empty round hole in the niche's vault, and began swaying gently.

I guessed at once that it was attached to the clock's bells, for whenever the cuckoo popped out of Auntie Valya's clock a weight would come swaying down in exactly the same way.

"It's got no more than two hours left," I said.

Vitalka gave me a firm look and said, "This thing's used to lift the weights." He nodded to the lever and the drum.

I had realised that myself but had no idea how it worked.

Vitalka, however, had already guessed.

"Let's fit the chain onto the cogs."

We had no difficulty at all swinging one chain over and fitting it onto the drum's cogs. Then we seized hold of the handle at the end of the lever.

"Heave-ho!"

It was like turning a windlass and pulling a heavy bucket out of a well, only instead of a bucket we had a weight and it was creeping away from us and not towards us.

The whole tower was vibrating with rumbling and clanking. Scaly particles of rust came showering down from the chain as it began slipping down from the drum and we could hear it clinking as it curled up on the basement's stone floor. Meanwhile the weight slipped up through the hole in the ceiling.

"We've done it!" breathed Vitalka.

In order to turn the handle we had to first stand on tiptoe and then squat on the floor. It wasn't easy work and I automatically started counting the turns. After the tenth I said, "Phew!.. Let's rest. Will we have to turn it much longer?"

Vitalka screwed up his eyes and stared at the drum.

"If you measured it all the way round, it would probably come to about a metre. And how far is it up to the clock?"

"About thirty metres... That means, we've got to wind it another twenty times."

Well, so we turned it and then paused for a rest and then turned it again, first lifting the weight attached to the hands and then the one attached to the bells.

Finally we straightened up, wiped our wet brows with our rusty brown palms and smiled for it seemed to us that the clock was now tapping in a cheerful and grateful manner.

And then all of a sudden another sound was added to the brass clanking: two iron objects were being scraped together somewhere down below.

We could not guess what it was at first but as the scraping sound continued, it soon became clear that someone was playing about with a key in the lock but not our key for ours was hanging from my belt.

We froze on our hands and knees at the edge of the hole.

The door finally opened slightly, letting sunlight in, and we rec-

ognised our old acquaintances, beaky-nosed Edik and pink-scalped Fedya the mountain-climber.

"It ain't locked," Edik said peevishly. "Couldn't you turn the key, sap?"

"Shut up," Fedya replied gruffly. "I almost bust turning it — twice! Someone's been in 'ere..."

"The shrimps," said Edik in a half-whisper, glancing up.

I stared at Vitalka, wondering what to do next. Perhaps we should make our presence known at once? After all, there was no way of escaping now...

But Vitalka was looking somewhere beyond me and pressing a finger to his lips.

I looked round and saw something we had not noticed at first because we were busy with the clock. In the other wall there was a niche, too, with plywood boxes and tight bales in sacking stacked in it.

Vitalka and I could understand each other at a glance.

"It's clear who they are, isn't it?" Vitalka asked with his eyes.

I recalled the conversations about the burgled shops and, feeling rather chilly and even slightly sick, winked back, "Yes."

Meanwhile the two of them were standing down below and gazing up.

Chapter Sixteen

Yes, they were standing there and gazing up...

I have to admit that in tricky situations Vitalka was quicker-witted and braver than me. And, as it turned out, this occasion was no exception: now, too, we had different plans in mind.

While I was wondering how to escape, Vitalka was thinking something quite different.

He suddenly stood up on the edge of the hole and called out casually as if to friends, "Hi there! We're already here!"

Beaky-nosed Edik started, stared round and then smiled belatedly, while Fedya blinked and said, "What are you up to?"

"We were winding up the clock!" Vitalka explained cheerfully. "Phew! Are we whacked! It's a shame you're too late..."

He yanked my collar to get me off my knees and so I had to get up.

"My word!" exclaimed Edik with a forced grin. "What early birds we are! Flew here before us! Well, come on down and have a chat."

"What about?" asked Vitalka cheekily. "So you have got a key, after all. Why have you been taking the mickey out of us?"

Edik sighed and said with a forced laugh, "My, you are sharp! Don't miss a trick, do you? Just like spies. We found the key. We were rummaging about in the museum's basement this morning and had a stroke of luck."

Vitalka pointed to Fedya with his chin and asked, "And how did he lock the door yesterday? With his finger?"

The smile vanished from Edik's face and he said in a quiet but menacing tone, "Come down and have a talk."

"We've plenty of time," replied Vitalka playfully. "We've still got to tidy up here: someone's knocked over your boxes."

"What d'you mean?" yelled Fedya and dashed over to the stone stairs.

Vitalka tugged me by the elbow, and we flew up the rickety wooden ladder to the second floor and then Vitalka dragged me over to the gaping hole again. Was I exasperated by Vitalka's stupidity!

"Why did you say that about the boxes? They won't let us out now."

Vitalka gave me a glance that was both angry and merry.

"But who said we want to be let out? We've got to make sure they don't get out! If they do, they'll scamper and we'll never find them again!"

"But how..." I began.

But Vitalka looked down through the hole and said in a mocking tone,

"Poor little mites! Scared, are we? Don't worry, we haven't touched your goods. It's up to the police to bother with them."

Edik and Fedya glared at us furiously. Shiny little beads of sweat appeared again on Fedya's nose, and Edik clenched his teeth.

"Rats," said Fedya hoarsely. "You want to grass on us, do you? Well, I'm going to wind your guts round your flipping necks first."

Without waiting around for that to happen to our guts, we dashed over to another ladder to discover it was half-broken and only its top rungs were still intact. Vitalka jumped up, caught hold of one and shouted, "Push me up!"

I grabbed his legs and pushed them as hard as I could. Then Vitalka pulled himself up and sat on the rung and stretched a hand out to me,

"Come on!"

Gosh, how my heart was pounding away! I was sure that any moment now Edik and Fedya were going to grab me by the ankles. Wildly kicking my legs, I somehow managed to hoist myself up to Vitalka. Then we grabbed hold of the edge of the hatch and crawled onto the third floor.

"Quick!" ordered Vitalka, bending over the hatch and seizing hold of the charred bar to which the rickety rungs were fixed.

I got the message and, joining forces, we shook loose the bar and it crashed down, almost crushing Edik and Fedya who were crawling up after us.

"Well, kids, that's going cost you," promised Edik.

"How much?" asked Vitalka fearlessly.

"What you deserve... Look, lads, come down here yourselves and don't make matters worse."

"Why should we?" asked Vitalka. "We like the air up here."

"Well, you'll be flying through it in a minute... And you'll be in such a mess when you hit the ground nobody'll be able to stick you together again..."

"Catch us first!"

Edik and Fedya started leaning the bar against the wall to climb up after us.

"That's it," said Vitalka. "Work hard. Get the feel of it. After all, you'll have to do a lot of work where you're going."

Fedya gasped and gave us such a bloodcurdling look that my teeth started chattering.

"Don't be scared," said Vitalka.

"I'm not," I somehow managed to mumble although I had never felt so scared before in my life.

I could not understand what Vitalka was trying to achieve and why he was goading these crooks on. How would we get away from them? Perhaps he had forgotten that we did not have our carpet with us?

These thoughts were jumping around higgledy-piggledy in my head, but what difference did it make now? We couldn't get down anyway. All we could do was keep on going up so as not to fall into the crooks' clutches.

Puffing and swearing, Edik and Fedya started climbing up the bar towards us.

"That's the stuff!" said Vitalka. "Exercises never did anyone any harm. Edik, mind you don't tread on Fedya's nose, it's almost transparent as it is."

"Let's push the bar away," I said hurriedly.

"All in good time," Vitalka whispered back. "We've got to make sure they have a hard time getting down. Come on, up we go!"

We started climbing up to the fourth floor. There wasn't a ladder and, quite honestly, I don't remember how we clambered up the beams, brick projections and charred planks. Vitalka pushed me up first and then overtook me and pulled me through the hatch by the scruff of my neck.

The hollow vibrant sounds of the clock's mechanism were coming from the fifth floor overhead reached by a strong ladder, which, however, did not quite touch the floor as its bottom rungs were missing.

We climbed onto it and Vitalka said, "Hold me really tight," and, pressing his stomach against the ladder, kicked the floor with all his might. The rickety boards and beams began shuddering and squeaking. Then he banged it a second time and the semi-dilapidated floor creaked and began sinking for it was obviously on the verge of collapse. Then there was a crack and the old wooden floor plunged downwards.

Howls and violent swearing broke out below.

"Great!" said Vitalka, genuinely pleased.

"What is so great?" I asked tearfully. "How are we going to get down?"

"We will — somehow or other. But we've got to go up first! Come on!"

We passed the floor containing the clock's mechanism without stopping and got up to the landing with the bells.

There was sunshine and blue sky everywhere! And clouds, green land and river, too! Were there really some crooks messing about down below? Could anything bad really happen to us up here in the lovely bright light?

Vitalka quickly unfastened my belt, pulled the key off, dashed up to the railing, and bent down over them.

"Vet-ka," he yelled.

Of course, Vetka was down there! I was so scared, I had forgotten!

I caught a glimpse of Vetka's dress by the monastery wall. She jumped out of the burdocks and stood still, craning her neck.

"List-en!" shouted Vitalka loudly and clearly. "Catch the key! Lock the door! You must lock the door! Then run and get the police! There're some crooks in here!"

The key went whistling downwards and clanked loudly as it hit the cobblestones. Vetka grabbed it fast.

Down below there was some cursing and trampling on the boards. After hearing about the police, our thieves, who were evidently still in one piece, were making down towards the door.

"Lock it quick!" yelled Vitalka. "Don't ask questions, just lock it!"

We leant over the railing as far as we could but we still could not tell whether Vetka had managed to lock the door.

There was a lot of crashing and banging down below, but we could not even see what Vetka was doing because she was concealed by the door's overlapping. It felt as if simply ages had gone by when she finally appeared in the sunlight, waving the key and shouting, "Done it!"

"Run and get the police!" yelled Vitalka.

"What about you?"

"We'll hang on! They won't get up here!"

I don't know what Vetka was thinking or what emotions were expressed on her face because she was too far away, but without saying another word, she tore off towards the monastery gates and we could hear the staccato tapping of her shoes fading away.

Hollow blows rang out below: it was Edik and Fedya pounding on the door.

We lay down on the floor and looked through the hole. After being in the bright sunshine, we could not make anything out, but the pounding continued and someone shouted, "Open up! You rats! We'll get you!"

I smirked. My fear had vanished for I was sure they would not get us. How could they? They couldn't get up here because we had wrecked the floor down below. And if they did, say, would they really dare lay a finger on us? They'd get into even more trouble if they did! And they couldn't escape because you could only break down a door like that with the help of a cannon! How cleverly Vitalka had worked everything out!

I glanced at him and saw he was smiling and the freckles on his nose were shining like rubbed brass. Mind you, he also had a bruise on his nose, and soot on his cheeks and a hole in his shirt through which his scratched tummy was showing.

"You look grand!" I said.

"You're not bad either," he replied jovially. "Auntie Valya's really going to lay into us!"

I sat down on the edge of the hole and, casually dangling my legs, started whistling a song from the film "The Last Inch":

In a far-off northern country
Where the winter's long and grim,
Splashing in the freezing water
is
a
tiny little
seal!

"Whistling, are you?" someone asked loudly below. "Well, just you wait, you pests!"

I was at once seized with fear again, but Vitalka remarked in a matter-of-fact manner, "Looks as if they're coming up here again..."

He went up to the railing, grabbed hold of a baluster and began rocking it to and fro. As it was obviously rotten, it soon gave way and cracked.

"Help me," said Vitalka.

I quickly came to his aid and we pulled the shoulder-high post out of its base, and then did the same with another two but that was all we could manage.

Balancing it in his arms, Vitalka said thoughtfully, "It makes quite a good club."

Then we heard hushed voices and heavy breathing down below and looked through the hole again. We saw Fedya and Edik making a ladder out of broken beams on the third floor.

Edik looked up. A ray of light from a loop-hole fell on his face and I was paralysed with fear. His face was really terrifying.

"Well, kiddies, you've had it. We're going to make mincemeat out of you," he said hoarsely, and I saw that he was holding a long thin knife. Why, it was mine! The one I'd dropped down the hole that first night!

For the first time Vitalka gave me an anxious look. We were really in trouble. The crooks were evidently so desperate that they would stop at nothing.

The most natural thing for us to do now would have been to start screaming with fear at the top of our voices. To this very day I am proud that I didn't. And neither did Vitalka. Instead, he jumped up, grabbed a baluster and hurled it at the crooks like a torpedo.

But it missed, bounced off a beam and crashed downwards.

The two crooks went on climbing up without even glancing at it. I grabbed hold of another baluster.

"Wait. We've got to save our ammunition," said Vitalka gravely.

We had made a mistake. We should have gone down to the fourth floor and repulsed our enemies while they were crawling shakily up their makeshift ladder. But we had stayed at the

top expecting a blue police car to race into the monastery yard at any moment as it always happens in a good film.

But there was no help coming down below and only the tiny figures of pedestrians flashed by in nearby streets. But we could not call to them for help because they were too far away...

I have no idea how much time passed but probably not very much because the clock had not struck once since our enemies appeared in the belfry. It seemed to us, however, as if we had been up there all day.

Edik and Fedya climbed up to the fourth floor and we lost sight of them behind a pile of wrecked beams and floorboards and could only hear them swearing in hushed voices.

And these hushed voices gave me the shivers.

At long last Fedya's fair head popped up over the hatch. I aimed my "torpedo" at him and he yelled and vanished. There was a loud thud down below.

"He'll have a fine bump!" said Vitalka gleefully.

But there was no time to celebrate because at that moment Edik crashed his way through the planks and up the hatch. He was scratched and torn and in a tearing rage. What's more, he was holding my knife in his fist.

All that was between us now was one floor and a strong ladder which you could not possibly wreck.

Vitalka stood over the hatch, straddling his legs, raised his "torpedo" and said shrilly, "Just you try coming near me, you thug..."

I looked round for a weapon such as a stick or a stone but there weren't any! And there was still nobody in sight!

And even if we screamed at the top of our voices, would anyone hear us?

However, despite the danger, I could not scream for some reason. No, I could not imagine myself shrieking "help" right across the town!

But what about striking a bell? I jumped onto the railing and tried to reach the bell hanging in the arched aperture. The largest one still intact, it could certainly make a really startling din...

But how could I reach it? A thick rope had been attached to its cast-iron tongue but all that was left of it now was a rotten scrap hanging about two metres above us.

I held onto a brick projection and stood upright on the railing. All of a sudden the brick moved under my fingers. The projection had obviously been damaged in the blast forty years ago.

Afraid to lose my balance, I jumped down onto the floor and a brick fell at my feet and broke into three pieces.

I grabbed one, took aim and hurled it at the bell as hard as I could! Dong!..

And again! Dong!..

My ears became blocked and although I could see Vitalka was saying something to me, I could not hear a word. I felt just as if the bell had fallen and covered me with its booming dome. I squatted, shook my head and picked the third bit of the brick off the floor.

Dong!..

I needed more stones. I jumped back onto the railing and began pulling at a brick, but it would not budge. My fingers slipped and I almost lost my balance, but straining my muscles hard, I managed to hang on. I glanced down in desperation.

Our magic carpet was rising swiftly towards us. Breezy stood intrepidly on it, his green shirt flapping in the wind.

"Vitalka! The carpet!" I yelled without hearing myself.

The carpet with its pilot hovered on a level with the banisters.

Vitalka spun round and, grinning from ear to ear, threw his weapon down the hatch, roared with laughter and rushed towards us.

We flew down fast, keeping close to the belfry, skimmed over the cobblestones, scaled the wall, slipped behind the steep bank and landed on a secluded ledge among tall weeds.

My ears were still buzzing, and at first I could not make out what Breezy was saying in an excited and breathless voice: "...trod on a bit of glass and was limping... And she told me to fetch the police fast! But what if the thugs got hold of you in the meantime. I thought. So I dashed over to get the carpet!"

"So you've learnt how to fly it!" exclaimed Vitalka joyfully.

Breezy smiled and said, "I didn't even think about it. I just had to rescue you. I climbed over the roof to your watch-tower, dragged

it out, unrolled it and shouted, 'Off we go!' And then I just flew off as if I wasn't even on it... But when I looked down I saw the carpet under me."

"Did anyone spot you?" Vitalka asked.

Breezy shook his head.

"I didn't fly straight. I first headed for the river and then kept behind the steep bank. I know what I'm doing, you know."

"What do you know?" asked Vitalka. "You don't know anything! You have no idea what a fantastic fellow you are!"

He slapped Breezy on the back and laughing loudly, pushed him onto the carpet. And then I burst out laughing, too, and collapsed in a heap on top of them. And we rolled about, shrieking with joy until we tumbled off the carpet into the weeds. Then we calmed down and fell silent because we suddenly remembered about Vetka cutting her foot.

"Has she cut it badly?" Vitalka asked.

"Not very," Breezy replied. "She just can't run very fast... What's that? Up there. Can you hear?"

It was the horns and sirens of police cars blaring louder and louder as they raced towards the tower.

Chapter Seventeen

We never did find out what exactly happened to Edik and Fedya. All sorts of fantastic rumours were spread around the town, and someone even said that a band of thieves had set up their den in the belfry and stored huge quantities of gold and weapons there. According to many versions, there had been a shoot-out between the crooks and the policemen. Some old women whispered that the large bell struck all by itself to make people remember their sins and catch the thieves in the belfry while they were at it.

Vitalka, Vetka, Breezy and I listened to these stories and laughed up our sleeves. True, we sometimes felt rather scared about someone finding out about the carpet, but nobody ever did.

It was a good thing that Auntie Valya and Mum disliked rumours and gossip, or else they would have quickly guessed that we simply had to be involved in the belfry incident.

And we even felt rather sorry for Edik and Fedya when we imagined them telling the police about the two boys who had climbed right up to the bells and then suddenly vanished into thin air. And, of course, nobody believed them! It's terrible when you're telling the truth and nobody believes you.

A few days later the rumours began to die down, and the town gradually forgot about the mysterious episode, but the clock went on working...

After our adventure on the belfry we did not fly for a long time because of the rains. First came warm showers, which caused steam to rise from the cobblestones and made splashes like glass crowns as they danced on the puddles. Then the rain began pouring steadily down, the puddles grew darker, and little bubbles began floating to the surface like tiny electric light bulbs. This meant we were in for a long spell of rain.

We were never bored, though, because we used to set out our cardboard armies and organise battles which, even througn the carpet, made the trimmings on Auntie Valya's chandelier jingle wildly.

Breezy and Vetka used to run in, wet and cheerful, and join in our battles.

Then Breezy brought *The Three Musketeers* over. It was a new copy and its covers decorated with dark crossed swords creaked slightly and smelt of glue and calico. And such wonderful adventures were inside it that we could not put it down for hours on end. We used to sit in a circle on the carpet like nomads round a camp-fire and take turns reading it aloud, and then everything else in the world ceased to exist. One day after such a reading session I tried to get up too quickly and crashed to the floor because my legs had gone to sleep without me realising it.

In the evenings Vitalka worked on his picture from the musketeers' life, depicting dark houses with little yellow windows, a large moon. a hunch-backed bridge and riders in hats and feathers streaming in the wind. Vitalka's horses were not very good and looked more like large dogs but everything else he drew beautifully.

And I planed some thin musketeer swords and made guards out of tin cans.

All this time the magic carpet dozed on the floor between our beds just like any ordinary carpet.

Towards the middle of August the rains stopped and it became sunny and windy again but not as warm as before. Small dark clouds with fluffy golden edges came scudding from the north, and although beautiful, such a cold sky was not tempting to fly in.

It was only at the very end of the month that summer returned bringing serene warm days, fluffy seeds and cobwebs floating through the air and the heady perfumes of overripe grass. The school term was approaching fast.

On the thirty-first of August we were summoned to a school meeting and lined up in classes in the yard. Then our head-teacher, Vera Severyanovna, made a speech from the porch, and told us that we must work particularly well that coming year. She said it at the beginning of every school year. Nobody could explain why she called every new school year special and why we were supposed to have done worse last year than we would in the next. However, nobody ever asked Vera Severyanovna that because they did not dare to.

You could not say she was very sharp-tempered, it was just that she always seemed dissatisfied. Large and heavily-built with very light hair namely (but not grey) and a fluffy scarf on her shoulders, she paced the corridors like a large snowman, catching culprits. In her opinion, if a person had not done anything naughty yet, he was bound to sooner or later and the same applied if he had not yet received a bad mark. She made the culprits stand by a wall all through break and took the "worst offenders" off to her office where she scolded them in a monotonous tone and summoned their parents.

To make up for it, we were very lucky with our teachers. My teacher in the fourth form would again be Maria Vasilievna, who had us in charge from the very first form, and I thought she was the kindest teacher in the whole wide world. But Vitalka, in the fifth form, would have different teachers now, the most important of them the home teacher, who was young and jolly like a summer-camp leader, and taught history and drawing. Vitalka had fallen in love with her on the very first morning and this was what caused all the

trouble. But more of that later. Suffice it to say that the first days of September were happy ones.

Our lessons ended early, we were not given much homework, and it was still summer. True, the light evenings were over and it was already dark by nine, but the dusk was warm and pleasant, and a full moon rose over the roof tops.

We would fly in currents of air which looked green in the moonlight, and the flying seeds would tickle our faces like fluffy insects.

Mum now knew about the flying carpet. I don't know how she found out about our adventures but one day she asked, "What is it you fly on?"

I had to own up and show her the carpet, and she sighed and shook her head. I tried to reassure her by saying that it was not a bit dangerous, but she said, "It's not that that's worrying me, it's that you've become so ... secretive. Couldn't you tell me? You didn't want to, did you?"

"Well... I thought Auntie Valya had told you," I replied evasively.

"Auntie Valya..." said Mum, smiling ironically. "What a shame I have to find out all about my own son from other people."

"I won't do it again, Mum," I said sincerely.

"All right... Only don't break your necks, you high fliers."

Uncle Seva came up and remarked that a lot of people flew in their childhood but none of them ever broke his neck, so there was no need for mother to worry...

From then on we did not go to too much trouble to hide our carpet for a lot of people already knew about it or, at least, a lot of boys did. Even boys we did not know used to come up, glance round and ask in a whisper if they could have a ride. And simply as a formality, we used to warn them that it was a secret and they would promise never to say a word about it and, indeed, nobody ever did.

Sometimes in the evenings we organised rides down the steep riverbank.

About seven people would pile onto it and sweep down the bank. The carpet would swish downhill, brushing the tops of the bushes, the currents of air sparkling in the moonlight. Our friends would squeal

in fright and delight as the river studded with green spots of light rushed towards us...

Then we would skim over the water, turn round and land on the narrow sandy bank.

The carpet could not carry so many passengers upwards so they had to scramble up the overgrown paths to the top again but nobody minded. It was rather like downhill tobogganning except that, unlike in winter, the evenings were caressingly warm, and abounding in green verdure, moonlit clouds and our friends' merry laughter.

But a few days later something dreadful happened: Vitalka broke his leg. It happened in a quite ridiculous manner and had nothing to do with the carpet: his foot slipped down a wide crack in a wooden pavement.

He had to keep his leg in plaster for three weeks and although it did not prevent him from flying, it meant he could not go to school. He was fairly cheerful about it for two days until he realised he would miss his drawing class on Saturday and then he became really miserable. You see, he remembered he had promised to show his pictures to his teacher.

He grumbled and whined so much that I lost my temper and yelled, "You're just like a little baby! You can wait, can't you?"

"No, I can't! I really miss her!" Vitalka snapped back.

Out of respect for his feelings, I went to see my ninth-form neighbour Klim, a cyclist who practically lived on his bicycle, and explained that Vetka's bicycle was being mended after yet another flying test but that Vitalka had to be taken to school and brought back after lessons were over. Klim turned me down by saying his bicycle had weak tyres and would not take an overload. I then reminded him that he gave rides to his class-mate Galya and she was certainly no featherweight. Without batting an eyelid, Klim then explained that he carried her on the wings of love and not on his bike. He talked down to me as if I was a small child and I lost my temper and remarked that no wings could possibly support someone Galya's size. This put a slight strain on our relationship and I had to beat a hasty retreat to Vitalka's.

After a great deal of thought, we decided to risk it.

Early in the morning I took Vitalka off to school and dropped him right outside the first-floor window of his class-room, and then collected him after school and raced home with him. Nobody spotted us in the morning, but in the afternoon we flew off, accompanied by the delighted whoops and envious whistles of many onlookers.

And at the first lesson on Monday Maria Vasilievna said, "Oleg, all sorts of stories have been circulating about you for a long time. Are they true? Do you really fly about on something? And if so, how?"

"It's just an ordinary flying carpet," I said. "Nothing special. At first Gorodetsky and I marvelled at it, too, but then we got used to it."

"Well I never!" said Maria Vasilievna.

She was surprised but not too much. Over the past three years we had given her so many different surprises that nothing could really shake her any more.

"Will you show me your flying carpet?" she asked.

"Why of course! We can even give you a little ride on it."

The class sprang to life.

"Quiet now, children," said Maria Vasilievna because discipline had to be maintained wonders or no wonders.

After this conversation I began to think that we had got off easily, but I was wrong.

It was late afternoon and I was waiting in my yard for Breezy and Vetka to turn up so that we could all go over to Vitalka's. And while I was waiting I was slashing the nettles and pretending they were Cardinal Richelieu's guards. It was an honest match: I had a new sword and my "opponents" had poisonous stings and prickly leaves. My arms and legs were covered with painful red blotches and my blade was green from the enemies' "blood".

I fenced my way through a dense formation of men to the Cardinal's captain — the highest bush with a venerable grey top.

"Hey, soldier boy! Come over here!" someone called.

Klim and Galya were standing by the gate.

"What do you want?"

"We don't want anything," said Klim spitefully. "But the head-

teacher certainly does. She's ordered me to deliver you to her dead or alive without delay."

I could tell he was not lying.

These summons gave me a shock although I did not show it. Jabbing my sword in the ground, I strode boldly towards the gate and even remarked in passing that lessons were over and the head-teacher could have had the decency not to bother a person when he was otherwise occupied.

Galya gave me a sympathetic look, but Klim said with a smirk, "Never mind, your harvesting can wait."

He sat Galya on the frame, told me to get on his luggage-carrier, and we set off for school.

And the nearer we got, the more nervous I became.

"Stop fidgeting," said Klim. "She's not going to eat you, is she?"

But that was beside the point: I knew no good could await me either, but could not very well run away, could I?

Klim and Galya dropped me by the school entrance and Klim said, "Well, off you go. I presume you know where her office is."

Yes I did! I had been there before but never of my own free will.

I started feeling ill at ease on the staircase, and it was not simply that I expected trouble, but that I always came to school decked out from head to toe in my grey cloth uniform, whereas now I had been "snatched", so to speak, straight off the street and transferred here from the holidays in a time-machine. Tousled, and scratched, with blots on my skin where my suntan was peeling off, I looked quite out of keeping with the school and its austere walls, posters and paintings of famous writers and a large sheet of school rules in a frame just like a picture. I now yearned for my hateful rough school shirt and prickly ankle-length trousers as for reliable armour against Vera Severyanovna's piercing eyes, her wrath and, in general, against all kinds of mishaps.

Unfortunately, the only piece of uniform I now had on was my dark shiny brass-buckled belt with a wooden dagger frivolously sticking out of it. A dagger like that wasn't going to get me out of trouble. I felt just as if I had been stood in an unheated corridor in winter in my light summer clothes.

With butterflies in my stomach I knocked on the study door and Vera Severyanovna called out, "Come in!" and, well, so I went in — what else could I do!

"Good afternoon," I muttered.

Vera Severyanovna was sitting at her huge desk and her reflection in the desk glass looked like an iceberg in a square patch of water. A bearded man in spectacles was sitting by her desk and looking at me in normal, kind sort of way while Vera Severyanovna stared at me accusingly.

"Come over here," she ordered.

I walked into the middle of the room but for some reason or other could venture no further.

"Well, here he is," Vera Severyanovna said to the man and then turned to look at me again as if she had really meant, "Just look what a sight he is!"

I felt completely defenseless, and I moved my dagger's handle round to the front to cover a hole in my sweat-shirt and folded my arms to hide my grubby hands but there was nowhere to hide my grass-stained elbows. I also wished I could pull up my dusty stung legs like aircraft wheels but as this was not possible either, I simply shifted restlessly from one plimsoll to the other.

"Stand up straight. Stop prancing about and put your arms down," Vera Severyanovna ordered.

Sighing, I did as I was told.

"Now listen here, Lapnikov," she said. "We'll discuss your conduct on another occasion, but right now I should like you to tell me how you do it and about all these flights of yours."

I shrugged my shoulders and wondered what I could tell her.

"We just fly..."

Whereupon she angrily snapped, "Stop twitching your shoulders and reply when you're asked a question. This gentleman has come here specially from an institute to find out all about your tricks. And you can rest assured, he will. Vasily Matveyevich is a Doctor of Physics."

"Oh is he, is he?" I thought. "Now he's going to start quizzing me about how we overcome the force of gravity and that sort of thing..."

"Are you going to keep silent for long?" she asked sternly.

The scientist looked at me and then at her and suddenly said, "Perhaps we could have a confidential talk?"

The head-teacher looked offended. I could tell so by the way she blushed and began tugging at the shawl on her shoulders. However, she did not snap at her visitor because he was not a pupil, you see. In fact she even smiled as she said, "You want to have a man-to-man talk, do you? Very well then..."

And out she went.

"Come over here, lad," Vasily Matveyevich said quietly, and I suddenly noticed he looked very like Uncle Seva. He stood me between his knees, touched my dagger handle with his fingertips, spotted the hole in my tee-shirt, grinned ever so faintly and looked up.

"Now start from the very beginning and tell me how it all happened. And don't be afraid of anything."

So I told him about how we found the carpet and how we went flying on it. However, I did not tell him the part about the belfry because it was of no importance to science.

He sat and listened and when I finished, said, "So you don't give it any orders? You don't say anything to it? You just have to will it and off you fly?"

I nodded and he smiled for some reason and then said in a strange voice,

"And is the carpet new?"

"No, it looks very old ... but it's still in good shape."

He suddenly burst out laughing, squeezed my elbows tightly and rumpled my hair, but I was in no laughing mood.

"Are you going to take the carpet away now?" I whispered and realised I might burst into tears at any moment.

Still laughing, he shook his head.

"No, don't worry!"

I believed him and stopped worrying.

In came Vera Severyanovna.

"Well, gentlemen? May I come in now?"

The physicist politely said she could because we had already cleared everything up.

"Have you now!" she exclaimed in surprise. "So soon?"

"Yes. You see, physics does not deal with problems of this kind."

"Really? That's odd... Which science does, then?"

The physicist smiled and shrugged.

"No science does, I'm afraid. Well, perhaps, poetry, but it's not a

science in my opinion. Science does not attempt to explain phenomena of this nature, and there is nothing really to explain here. A lot of people fly when they're children — on magic carpets or without any apparatus at all..."

"And ... what's going to happen now?" Vera Severyanovna asked in a nervous tone, and gave me such a look that I stepped back into the middle of the room again.

The physicist followed me with his eyes.

"Nothing. Unfortunately, childhood passes quickly."

"Yes but ... before it does, can you imagine the things they'll get up to? Besides, I don't understand the most important thing here, namely, how they do it?"

"Well... Evidently, by using their imagination."

"What does that mean?" Vera Severyanovna asked in vexation. "Everyone's got imagination but they're not leaping up into the sky, are they now? I'm absolutely sure that no matter how much imagination I had, I still wouldn't be able to fly."

"Yes, I can easily believe," said the physicist politely.

Vera Severyanovna stared for a long time at him and then at me, and then through the window, tapped her fingers on her desk and then looked at me again in the same accusing way as always and said, "You may go now, Lapnikov. Come back with your mother tomorrow."

Well, blow me down!

"But what have I done?" I asked by dint of habit.

"No questions, please!" she rapped irritably, "I told you to bring your mother and that will do. We'll go into exactly what you've done with her."

And then I got really angry but did so in a quiet way, inside me, and realised I was no longer afraid of her because she had no right to shout at me for no reason. Had I broken some glass, or written grafitti on the walls, or smoked in the breaks, or got lots of low marks? No, nothing of the kind! All right, I had flown with Vitalka on a magic carpet but so what! It was our carpet, not hers.

I was sick to death of this whole business and wanted to get it over as quickly as possible, so I stared unflinchingly at her, scratched my right ankle with my left plimsoll and said nonchalantly, "Mother's busy tomorrow. If you like, I'll bring her today."

The physicist smiled at me.

"Bring her today then!" Vera Severyanovna snapped back.

"Is now all right?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's fine then," I said, straightened the dagger in my belt and walked out.

Back at home I told Mum that the head-teacher wanted to see her, but that I had not done anything wrong and it was all to do with the magic carpet.

"I knew as much," she said and left off her work in the kitchen and went into her room. Five minutes later she reappeared in the beautiful dress she wore out to friends' or the theatre. She glanced quickly at me and said, "Well, at least change your shirt. You look like a scarecrow."

But I quickly explained that I had already been to school looking "like a scarecrow" and that it had nothing to do with my clothes. They wanted to ban our flying. So mother simply waved her hand and off we set.

We walked along side by side: beautiful, determined-looking mother and her good-for-nothing son in a faded tee-shirt, crumpled shorts and with a wooden dagger in his belt.

I could see that Mum was slightly annoyed but could not decide whether I or someone else was the cause.

When we appeared in the head-teacher's office, the scientist had already left.

"Do be seated," Vera Severyanovna said to Mum.

Mum sat down while I remained standing by the door. However, I no longer felt defenseless — because Mum was there and because of things in general... I stood and waited and Mum sat and waited, too.

"I want to have a word with you about your son," began Vera Severyanovna. "I must say he's giving me concern."

"Really?" said mother in a restrained manner and looked attentively at me.

"Yes. As far as I remember, he was one of the top pupils in his class last year but I'm afraid he won't be this year."

"But the term's only just begun," remarked mother.

"But it's begun in a bad way for him!" Vera Severyanovna retorted. "Look at what he and Gorodetsky have got up to! Flying through the air, indeed!"

"But, you know, children will..." Mum began carefully.

"That's the whole point — they're children! Let them finish school first and then start flying. We can hardly control them on the ground as it is, but what if all children start racing through the air?"

"All children won't," I butted in. "Not everyone's got a flying carpet..."

Vera Severyanovna looked at me as if she had only just noticed my existence and said, flatly, "Go out into the corridor, Lapnikov."

What a mean trick to play! They were going to discuss my magic carpet with me out in the corridor! I looked at Mum in confusion.

"Go on, Oleg," she said sternly.

I strode out in a huff and stood by the window. Through the door I could hear Mum's quiet voice and Vera Severyanovna's loud one but did not try to work out what they were saying. Eavesdropping was below my dignity!

Then the voices stopped and Mum came out and quietly said, "Let's go."

And so we walked side by side down the corridor and the stairs and across the school yard in silence.

Outside in the street Mum put her hand on my shoulder and said in a rather strange way, "Well, darling..."

I looked up.

"What?"

She paused and then asked gravely, "Do you really have to fly?"

"Of course, we do," I said hastily. "Well, Mum, how can we not fly when we've a flying carpet..."

"Well, keep on with it, then," said Mum.

And so we did, all that warm September and the following summer and the one after that...

Then we went flying less often. We had grown older and had various other new interests. In the eighth form Vitalka started falling in love every month and had his head in the clouds without flying on any carpet. And I started writing poetry and was always feeling down in the dumps because the local newspaper had just turned down yet another poem.

The carpet was packed away in the box-room again and Auntie Valya started storing her broken furniture in the attic room.

We left school and, before we knew it, had completely grown up. Things did not quite work out as we had dreamed: Vetka became a children's doctor and not a ballerina. Mind you, a very good one and all the children in her district in Leningrad are fond of her. Breezy did, in fact, end up doing what he wanted to — he became a navigator in the Arctic air force. He now has a chubby little three-year-old son called Alyoshka who is not at all like the Breezy we knew.

After listening to my heart, the doctors on the naval training school's selection committee advised me to consider a profession on dry land. So I started writing books for children and I must say I am now very pleased about my profession.

Vitalka or, rather, Vitaly Andreyevich now lives near Moscow and teaches art at a school supervising lessons, taking the children on excursions and teaching them to draw rainbows, sunsets, moonlit lakes, green groves, and blue rivers and to appreciate the world's beauty.

However, that is by no means all that he does. He recently sent me a copy of a thick art magazine containing insets of paintings by young artists which had been awarded prizes at a national exhibition. Among them was Vitaly Gorodetsky's "Childhood Memories".

Drifting over the green earth, motley roofs and clumps of trees and under the bright morning clouds is a magic carpet carrying two little boys; one is sitting on the edge with his tanned legs dangling over the side, one foot bare and the other just about to lose its sandal. The boy is laughing with his head thrown back and looking up at the clouds. Blazing in the sunlight under the clouds is a rectangular kite. The other little boy is lying on his stomach with his feet in the air, gazing down below at a little girl standing by a porch made of fresh yellow planks. From high up she seems very tiny and in actual fact is not very big either.

The girl is not looking at the flying carpet but at the roof of the house where a boy in a green shirt, which is flapping in the wind, is pulling on the string of the kite. It is the height of summer, so much so that the painting seems to smell of goosefoot, wormwood, river sand and sun-drenched wooden fences.

Gazing at the painting, I felt a mixture of joy and sorrow — joy because the painting radiated it, and sorrow because I felt as if a

window looking out onto childhood — a land of no return — had been flung open for an instant.

And I also felt envious of Vitalka for describing the fairy-tale world of our childhood so wonderfully well in his painting! But what had I done? How had I thanked our magic carpet? I decided there and then to write a book about it and this is the result. However, in order to write it, I first had to go back and visit my home town and remember everything.

But I was afraid to. I felt the town would be different from how I remembered it. The houses would be low and old, the streets narrow and the river small and murky.

But I was wrong. The town was just the same as before. The wooden houses and their large glittering windows were like tall fairy-tale palaces and their yards were still spacious and green. And the washing was flapping in the wind like festive flags and little boys were playing rowdy games. There were less wooden pavements and more multi-storey apartment blocks, and new white motor ships were tooting on the river, but the off-shore breeze still smelt of wet sand, tarred boats and damp logs. The same long weeds grew along the fences in the lanes.

My family's house had been demolished and a nine-storey building erected in its place, but Auntie Valya's house was still standing and she herself was still living there, just as she had done all those years ago. She was now completely grey but otherwise had not changed at all. We spent half a day chatting together and reminiscing over those far-off days when Vitalka and I lived in her attic room. Several times I felt an urge to ask her where the carpet was but did not dare to because it had all begun to seem like a fairy-tale.

Auntie Valya got out Vitalka's childhood drawings, our cardboard soldiers and even a cannon made of cotton reels. Even its elastic band was still in perfect working order and the cannon was ready to be fired at any moment.

"What terrible battles you used to have!" she exclaimed. "The whole house used to shake. You certainly were awful scamps!"

"We were impossible people," I said, laughing. "You ought to have put us out into the yard and not allowed us back until we learnt to behave decently."

"And the things you got up to with that gramophone! You thought I didn't know..."

I sighed. The gramophone was still standing in the same place under a crocheted cover, and so was the cuckoo clock. The cuckoo had lost its voice but still dutifully flopped out of its window and opened its beak every half-hour...

Then I went for a stroll in the streets. A few houses away I peeped inside a large yard and saw some children playing in the grass by some wooden outhouses. They were staging circus acts or wrestling matches, I could not quite tell which.

Yes, they were in fact more like a contest of some kind. They came out in pairs into an empty space and wrestled. The wrestlers panted hard, fell, got up again, and threw each other, while the spectators sitting on the stacks of logs and in the grass, clapped and whistled just like fans do the world over. I went up without being noticed at first but then a boy with a loud voice and a defiant-looking dark fringe glanced round and asked, "Who do you want?"

Instead of making something up, I said I used to live near here and was now walking about and recalling my childhood.

"May I watch you playing?" I asked.

The boy shrugged his shoulders and then said, "Well, why not! Go ahead!"

I stepped closer and saw they were wrestling on a carpet and not on the grass, and recognised it in a flash.

No, I did not say anything to start off with, I simply looked at the familiar patterns over which two nine- or ten-year-olds were rolling — a round-headed, ginger-haired boy with twinkling eyes, and a puny little fellow with huge eyes and a few freckles on his cheeks wearing a sleeveless tee-shirt.

"I wonder if they know about this carpet," I said to myself and felt slightly shivery with excitement.

No, they didn't. They were rolling about it with their tanned arms and legs intertwined, thumping their feet on it and shoving their noses into it without even guessing what a wonderful carpet they were on!

And it was calmly lying there and waiting for someone to discover its secret. Or perhaps it had already given up hope?

...The ginger-haired boy pinned his thin opponent's shoulder-blades against the carpet and jumped up. The audience clapped rather

unenthusiastically, and a little girl with a tousled plait said angrily, "But what did you expect! That wasn't a fair match!"

"It's not my fault, is it?" said the ginger-haired boy, blinking.

His opponent silently stood up and walked away and the girl stared hard after him.

"I say," I said. "...Where did you get this carpet?"

The boy with the defiant-looking fringe glanced suspiciously at me and asked, "Why?"

"I'm just curious."

"An old lady gave it away," explained the ginger-haired boy. "To him." He nodded towards the thin boy he had just beaten. "We used to play at circuses in his yard and she's a neighbour of his and just gave it to him as a present... It's a good carpet. It looks old but it's ever so soft..."

"I know," I said, realising I was taking a decisive step. "It used to belong to me and a friend of mine... It's a magic carpet."

They laughed quietly because they had taken what I had said as an adult's unsuccessful attempt to win popularity among children.

"You don't believe me," I said, realising I could prove nothing. "Well, never mind... But we used to fly on it, you know."

"Well, why not have a go now?" said the boy with the fringe mockingly.

"Well, why not!" I thought, but I knew at once that I would never dare to. I imagined myself — a large adult in an ironed suit — sitting in the middle of the yard on an old carpet with little boys shrieking with laughter all around.

Smiling awkwardly, I said, "It won't work. I'm too grown-up now."

"But how do you fly on it?" the girl with the untidy plait suddenly asked.

"It's very simple. You just have to imagine you're flying, and off you go..."

"Hurrah! I've imagined it!" the boy with the fringe shouted out mockingly and collapsed on the carpet.

"Me, too! Hurrah! Yes, I have, too," shouted the others piling onto the carpet and even the little girl with the plait dived on top.

Only the thin boy in the blue tee-shirt remained sitting aloofly on a log with his chin tucked in his knees. We caught each other's eye for a moment, but he immediately looked away.

"Oh, get off! You're crushing my neck! Let go of my leg!" voices rang out from the heap.

Then someone quick-witted called out, "There'll be cartoons on the box any moment now! At four-twenty!"

The heap fell apart and the ex-wrestlers and fans raced off home to watch TV without even glancing at me. Only the little girl called good-bye as she ran past.

I sadly watched them run off and then turned to the carpet again and saw that I was not alone.

The boy in the blue tee-shirt was standing by the carpet, looking so pale and thin that his freckles seemed like little dark seeds.

"Please..." he began in a rather guilty but at the same time demanding tone, "Please tell me ... were you joking! You were, weren't you?"

I gulped nervously and said quietly, "No, I wasn't."

"But things like that just don't happen," he said in a low but almost angry tone, and his eyes grew dark.

"Yes, they do," I said, continuing to stare at him.

We were silent for a while. A strange silence hung over the yard.

"They don't usually ... but they still do, you mean?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes," I said.

"And you've ... just got to imagine you're flying?" he asked in an almost inaudible whisper.

It was very hushed all around, and you could only just hear ringing rising from the grass. Or perhaps it was the sunbeams or summer itself tinkling.

With his eyes glued to me, the boy slowly knelt down on the carpet, sat down, turned away from me, and for some reason or other stroked the carpet. Then he stretched out his palm over it.

The carpet rose slightly, hovered for a moment about half a metre off the ground and then gently slid over the tops of the grass.

The boy uttered a low cry, rolled off onto the ground, jumped up, dashed over to me, hugged me tightly. I felt his heart fluttering under his tee-shirt like a ball which had been thrown into a corner and was bouncing to and fro between the walls. He gave me a desperate look, and a mixture of fear and delight radiated from deep inside his dark eyes.

Him Jyoti School
3812

"Don't be scared," I said. "Believe me, there's nothing to be frightened of."

He smiled as if saying, "I understand, but I'm not used to it yet."

"Look, it's waiting for you," I said.

And, sure enough, the carpet had landed on the grass again and was waiting there.

The boy sighed and jerked away from me.

"Go on, don't be scared."

He stood still for a while, and then nodded, tucked his loose tee-shirt into his trousers, and, glancing round at me, walked slowly but surely towards the magic carpet.

I watched him as he went, feeling slightly envious because all sorts of wonderful adventures lay ahead of him. And I wished him luck!

REQUEST TO READERS

Raduga Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

Please send all your comments to 17, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, USSR.